Ella P Bennett

Young Woodley

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A NOVEL

by JOHN VAN DRUTEN

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TO

HELEN GAHAGAN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN VAN DRUTEN was born in London, England, in 1902. After leaving school he took up the Law, and has since been Lecturer of English Law at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.

In addition to *Young Woodley,* produced in New York in 1925 and in London in 1928, Mr. Van Druten's plays include: *Chance Acquaintance,* and *The Return of the Soldier,* dramatised from Rebecca West's novel, both produced in London, and *Diversion,* produced in London and New York. He has also contributed stories, poems, sketches, articles and reviews to a number of magazines. The present volume is his first novel.

NOTE

THE idea of converting "Young Woodley" into a novel occurred to me first rather more than a year ago, at a time when, owing to the Lord Chamberlain's ban, it seemed unlikely that the play would ever be seen upon the English stage. While this ban was lifted before I actually started writing, I had by that time plotted so much of the book in my mind that I felt loth to sacrifice a number of incidents and details which had become to me an essential part of Woodley's story, and would not be denied; hence, this novel.

I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all those who have been concerned in the production of the play, and of expressing my appreciation and admiration of the artists who have brought Woodley and Laura to life; namely Mr. Glenn Hunter and Miss Helen Gahagan in America, and Mr. Frank Lawton and Miss Kathleen O'Regan in England.

J. V. D.

London, December, 1928.

Young Woodley

YOUNG WOODLEY

I

IT was half-past one, and Cope was laying the table for tea in the Prefects' Room. He was their fag, and this duty made a daily infraction into his luncheon hour which he greatly resented. His life at Mallowhurst, however, was a series of resentments, mitigated by a number of minor consolations of which the chief was bullying the new boys in Lower I. Cope himself was in Lower II and, to the members of the inferior forms, quite a personage. To the Prefects of the Tree House, he was their room-fag; a dirty, lazy, inky little slacker of fourteen, with the traditional housemaid's capacity for breakages, and the most inefficient member of the O.T.C. Recruit Squad, of which Milner was the Sergeant. To them he had no private existence and they knew nothing of the interests and worries thereof, which were numerous and varied.

The worries included, at the moment, silk-worms, threepence, a fountain-pen and the meaning of the word "rape." The silk-worms, which he kept in a cardboard box on the floor of his locker, had been overtaken with a disease which he had been told would be cured by his inking them all over, and the treatment did not appear to be proving successful; the threepence had been a loan to Anthony Minor, but he had lost the I.O.U. and Anthony had repudiated the debt; the fountain-pen was a Tom Thumb which he had bought for a shilling at Crawley's, but it had developed an immediate and extensive leak, of which he bore evidence

all over him, and the nib had become incurably crossed through employment as a dart. The word "rape" was a mystery; he had looked it up in the dictionary and was as puzzled as ever, because he didn't know the meaning of "carnal knowledge."

Apart from such purely personal problems as these, his official capacity as Prefects' fag gave him considerable trouble in its perpetual conflict with his private life as an ordinary member of the school; subjecting him to two independent, yet overlapping, jurisdictions; imposing on him two distinct sets of duties, without corresponding rights, and involving him in a continual series of dilemmas which he usually solved by being caught on both horns. He was forever finding himself due in two places at the same time and generally succeeded in being late for both. His life was extremely complicated, and he was very miserable, though not particularly aware of the fact. He accepted his lot with the patience of a sufferer undergoing painful medical treatment.

Of the four Prefects who were the masters of his slavery in the Tree House at Mallowhurst, he hated Milner and Vining, didn't mind Woodley, and worshipped Ainger, who was House Captain, good-looking and athletic, a swift three-quarter at Rugger, and, on the whole, kind and considerate to Cope, who was always trying to do things to please him, which Ainger did not notice. Cope's devotion to him dated from his first term at Mallowhurst when, hunting for his name on the Rugger Lists, certain that he ought to be somewhere where he wasn't, Ainger had come up and asked him what he was looking for.

"My name," he had answered. "I know I ought to be playing football this afternoon, and I can't find it anywhere."

The sheet he was looking at happened to be the First Fifteen practice list, but Ainger had not laughed.

"That's the big boys' list," he had said. "Yours will prob-

ably be that pink sheet, over there. You'll have to hurry. You're late, but you can tell them I kept you. My name's Ainger."

Cope had never forgotten that. Ainger was his god. Vining, on the other hand, was a bully, with a passion for wrist-twisting, head-knuckling, and ear-pulling. Cope employed Vining's methods on the Lower First. He hoped one day to be like Ainger and admired by the Lower School.

He finished his somewhat perfunctory setting of the table and turned to go. As he reached the door he noticed a sheet of paper lying on top of Woodley's writing-pad, and stopped to look at it. It was a poem, and, but for the signature, Roger Woodley, he would have put it down. Poetry had no attraction for him; the standard punishment for minor offences in the Tree House was the learning by heart of twenty lines of Milton, and Cope was in a fair way to knowing the whole of *Paradise Lost*. But a poem of Woodley's was a different matter. It was called "Song," and he read it:

Over the grass the dead leaves dance
To the music of the wind,
Blown hither and thither by idle chance,
And in their dancings they seem to find
The furthermost corners and crannies and holes,
Stir them to life for a moment, and then
Fall to rest round the great tree-boles,
Silent and dead to the world of men.

Over my heart my dead loves stray
To dance to the calling of memory,
Blown from the graves where they buried lay,
By the wind of thoughts in the heart of me.
And the innermost corners to life they wake,
That lay by the winter of sorrow chilled,
As the wind's caprices their bodies take,
Then, fluttering, fall and again lie stilled.

"And what do you think you're doing?"

Cope jumped as he heard Woodley's voice behind him.

"Nothing, Woodley."

"I see."

"I . . . I was only reading your poem, Woodley. It was lying there. I hope you don't mind. It's . . . it's awfully good. Excuse me, but . . . I've got to go," and with that he turned and ran.

Woodley laughed as the door slammed, but uncomfortably. He didn't want the fags reading his poetry; or anyone, for the matter of that. He was a fool to have left it lying about. *"Over my heart my dead loves stray."* What would Cope think? He would laugh at him and tell the other fags. Damn! Woodley felt himself blushing; then he sat down to read the poem again. It wasn't bad, it really wasn't. Should he send it to *The London Mercury,* or *The Spectator,* or one of the other reviews that published poetry? He would have to address it from his home of course; he wouldn't want them to know he was a schoolboy, not yet eighteen. What did people pay for poetry? A pound? Milton only got five pounds for *Paradise Lost,* but that was hundreds of years ago, and besides, money was worth more then.

What did one say when one submitted a poem? *"Dear Sir, I beg to submit the enclosed poem, hoping you will publish it."* That was what he had said last time, but perhaps it wasn't right; anyway, the poem had come back from nine different papers, and was going to appear in the School Magazine as a last resort, next term. Bailey, the editor, didn't care for poetry, but it filled up a corner. Well, he would send this to *The London Mercury* and see. It seemed to him nearly as good as some of the Rupert Brooke poems, and not unlike them. He had been given Brooke's 1914 Poems by his aunt the previous Christmas, and had steeped himself in them. He admired Brooke enormously, secretly

even thought he was perhaps not unlike him. He got up now from his chair and looked at himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He was a tall, slim, long-legged boy, fair-skinned almost to transparency, with soft, untidy, light brown hair.

He jumped as the door slammed, blushing at being caught looking at himself, and began to cram the poem hastily into his pocket. He looked up, and saw Ainger. Ainger laughed.

"What are you looking so guilty about? What have you got there? Another poem?"

"Yes."

"Can I see?"

"If you like. It's pretty rotten."

He pushed it at him diffidently, and went and sat on the window seat with his back to him, while Ainger stood reading it. There was a long silence.

"Well?" Woodley asked roughly.

Ainger handed it back.

"I like it," he said. "Of course, you know I don't know anything about poetry, but it seems pretty good to me. Do you like it yourself?"

"Yes. I . . . I think I do, rather." He folded it, and put it carefully in his pocket. There was silence for a moment, and then Ainger spoke, with a certain diffidence.

"I say . . ."

"What?"

"Well . . . excuse my asking . . . but . . . *have* you ever been in love?"

Woodley turned away from him.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well . . ."

"I don't know. No. Oh, I don't know. In a way. No. I haven't really. Well, then, what right have I got to write about it? Is that what you mean?"

"I only wondered."

"I suppose it *is* damn silly."

"I don't know about that."

"Well, I've got some imagination . . . I mean, I can sort of imagine what it's like. And I can't be expected to experience everything I write about . . . not yet, anyway."

"I wasn't criticising you."

"No, but you're right. It is damn silly . . . in a way. I don't *know* anything, really. Fat lot of chance one gets at school."

"Well, you ought to have enough to do without that."

"Yes. Algebra for Simmy, for example. My God! Double period this afternoon, too. O Lord, what a life!"

Ainger grinned at him, and picked up *The Autocar*.

Woodley was fond of Ainger, who stood for a good-natured, unimaginative solidity, and an affection and sympathy, inarticulate and unexpressed, save in kindness and in refraining from teasing. He admired his efficiency, his assurance and his quiet, gentle level-headedness. He had no suspicion that Ainger admired him in return, that he regarded him with a curious mixture of affection and awe, the mystified respect usually mingled with a faint mistrust, which the writer inspires in the layman. They had been friends for three years, and shared a study.

At two o'clock the Sixth assembled in Simmons's classroom, where he proceeded to instruct them in the mysteries of geometrical progression. They were none of them particularly interested, and after about ten minutes Woodley frankly gave up listening, just as he had long ago abandoned the attempt to understand Mathematics. It was a subject that his mind refused to grasp; it slipped away from his comprehension as soap slips out of the hand in the bath. His childhood had been made wretched with questions about bottles and corks costing half as much again as each other, or problems with trains passing at

different speeds; he had cried through Sunday lunches with a persistent uncle over these and similar horrors, and when the uncle died had experienced a relief so great that he was positively ashamed of himself. He had spent a miserable holiday coaching arithmetic with a depressed private-school master for his entrance examination into Mallowhurst, and, once entered there, had flopped and floundered through maths. all the way up the school, always at the bottom of the class, learning by heart just enough of formulæ and propositions to save him from utter ignominy, but no longer making any effort to understand what he was learning. He was good enough at other subjects to avoid serious trouble; Simmons, it is true, regarded him as something not far removed from a half-wit, but as he had never made any intelligent attempt at explanation, he was himself partly to blame. It was unfortunate that he should also be Woodley's house-master; their encounters in class put their more personal relations at an initial disadvantage. Woodley thought Simmons a swine and left it at that, without resentment, accepting him as the sort of thing one has to expect at school. Simmons thought Woodley a lazy young slacker and had the additional cause of disapproval that he was "artistic." Having more than once caught him writing poetry in class, objecting to it not only as an impertinence and a misdemeanour, but as the sign of an unhealthy temperament.

This afternoon, having allowed his attention to wander, Woodley began making a fair copy of his poem. He had only reached the second line, however, when he heard his name in Simmons's dry, flat voice.

"Woodley, what are you doing?"

He started, pushed the paper under his book, and tried to assume an appearance of unconcern.

"Nothing, sir."

"What are you writing?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Indeed? That is surely a very modest estimate of the literary value of your efforts. I take it I am right in assuming it to be a poem?"

"No, sir."

"No? Have you turned to prose or the Drama perhaps? Bring it here."

Woodley reluctantly took the paper to the desk. Simmons looked at it.

"Why do you say it is not a poem?" he asked. "Not, surely, out of the same modesty that impelled you to value it as nothing?"

"It's only two lines, sir."

"*O si sic omnes.* Which, in case your knowledge of Latin is on a par with that of your Mathematics, I may perhaps translate for you as 'if only they were all as short.'"

The class sniggered faintly in the hope of encouraging him to a further waste of time on sarcasm.

"I do not doubt, however, that had I not nipped your flow of inspiration in the bud," Woodley noted the mixed metaphor and smiled annoyingly, "you would hardly have had sufficient reticence to content yourself with two lines. Am I right?"

"No, sir."

"But do you really think that this is the proper time and place—assuming that there *is* a proper time and place—for the writing of even a two-lined poem? Do you?"

"No, sir."

"Of course it may be that your knowledge of Geometrical Progression is already so complete that you feel justified in devoting your attention to the composition of your deathless verse. I am willing to give you the benefit of that possibility. Supposing you prove it by giving us a brief résumé of what I have been saying this afternoon. Prose will do, unless of course you find it easier to do it in verse." He

pulled a couple of hairs from his nose. "We are waiting, Woodley."

Woodley paused.

"I can't, sir."

"Can't? Oh, surely. You need not be modest. Do not be afraid of shaming me with your greater knowledge, I beg you. Pray correct any errors I may unwittingly have made. I am always willing to endure any humiliation in the interests of learning. Proceed."

Woodley stood with his eyes on the floor, his lower lip thrust out.

"I can't, sir. I don't know it."

"In-deed? May I say that that piece of information does not come altogether as a surprise to me? I have long known that yours was a rare spirit, superior to such unromantic matters as Mathematics. You despise them, don't you? All the same, I think they can hardly be entirely dispensed with. For the honour of the prefecthood, of which you happen, somewhat unaccountably I must say, to be a member, I cannot very well send you with the little boys to Task Book to learn it there. But I do suggest—oh, very humbly and with all due deference—that you might bring me to-morrow morning a complete statement in writing of the subject in hand, together with the exercises in Hall and Knight, accurately worked out. And, in prose, if you will be so kind. And I think also, to guard against any return of poetic inspiration, it might be as well if you spent the rest of the period standing there on the floor. We will now resume."

The lesson proceeded but, having missed the earlier portion, Woodley found that it meant nothing to him. He let his attention travel round the barren ugliness of the classroom; the rusty iron supports of the desks, the bare, rough, unstained floor-boards, and the green distempered walls, hung with framed yellowing groups of the 'eighties and

'nineties, photographs of wooden figures, masters with beards and mutton-chop whiskers, boys with round, expressionless, old-fashioned faces.

Simmons took no further notice of him, but went on writing on the grey slate blackboard in a large scrawling hand, his long, bony fingers gripping a tiny economical stub of chalk, now and then giving a hitch to his gown, dingy and torn, as though a cat had ripped it with its claws.

The class sat in vaguely attentive apathy. Woodley exchanged a wink with Ainger, and let his gaze move on out of the window, at the gravel playground and the ugly, grey Victorian Gothic of the newer school buildings in the afternoon sun. His mind wandered again.

A few days before, Campbell, the English master, had introduced the Sixth to "Biography for Beginners," as a baffling exercise in scansion, and the form had amused Woodley. He began now improvising, in imitation, on the subject of the wives of Henry VIII:

> Katherine of Aragon
> Was a wifely paragon;
> She had innumerable progeny,
> Owing to Henry's lack of misogyny.
> When all but one died, her divorce
> Followed as a matter of course.

He was searching for a rhyme to "adultery," in dealing with Anne Boleyn, when the Assembly bell brought the hour to an end. There was a sudden bursting open of doors, a scrambled rushing and tumbling, and the school trooped into the Great Hall, large, gloomy, and oak-panelled, with a red-carpeted rostrum at the end. On one wall, under a laurel wreath, hung the photographs of boys killed in the war, bright untroubled faces of youths ranking now with Hector and Achilles, legendary heroes. The remain-

ing walls bore dark, inscrutable oil-paintings of founders and benefactors. The School sat on chairs, the lower forms in front, the Sixth occupying the rear rows, and the Prefects standing, ranged against the back wall in order of seniority. Woodley, being the junior, came last.

The door of the Head's private room opened directly on to the platform. He was a tired giant of a man who had entered School-mastering via the law, intending it as a short cut to literature. He had forgotten that intention now, together with its manifestations, two novels and a blank verse play on Xenophon, long out of print. After ten years as a classics master, he had accepted the Headship of Mallowhurst, and had filled it for another twenty, continuing to teach classics, and introducing a novelty with an attenuated course on the "Sources and Elements of English Law," for the modern side of the Sixth. Disappointed of literary ambition he had developed a certain histrionic talent; he had, as assets, a commanding figure and a deep 'cello of a voice, using them to impress a tyrannical authority which, starting by imposing on parents and the Lower School, had ended now in imposing on himself. He was a bachelor, without human interests; he had few friends and no intimates. He was feared and respected by the school; feared and disliked by the staff.

He was at his best in Assemblies, a master of dramatic effect, and was given to calling them slightly more often than was necessary. This afternoon he stepped on to the platform, and delivered himself briefly.

"For the future," he said, "Mallow Woods are out of bounds. The usual penalties will attach to any boy seen there after to-day. I may perhaps also take this opportunity of reminding you—the connection is, I think, sufficiently obvious to need no explanation—that you are forbidden to associate with residents of the town. I do not, of course, refer to friends or relatives, but to what, in the school ver-

nacular, are known as 'Townees.' I do not think I need say more. Dismiss."

The school dispersed. Woodley went to his locker and then down to the Prefects' Room to tea. It was large and square and bright, with windows looking on to the Lane; peeping in at these windows was a punishable offence—penalty, twenty lines of Milton. Below the windows was an impromptu seat, made of cushions, cretonne, and packing-cases; the walls were hung with Cricket and Rugger groups, interspersed with Kirchner drawings and pages from *La Vie Parisienne* which Vining bought periodically. In the corner was a portable gramophone and a wireless set; the chairs and the large oak settle against the wall were littered with bats, pads, cricket-boots, motor-papers and magazines. The room was very untidy.

Woodley found the others already at tea: Ainger, Milner, and Vining. Vining was tall and inclined to be fat, a faintly Jewish type, flashily good-looking and rather too well dressed for school. His nails were manicured and his hair sleekly groomed; only the Prefects were allowed to oil their hair, and Vining was one of the few who availed themselves of the privilege. He had a large number of bottles on his washstand.

Milner was ruddy-faced and pleasant. He was Vining's satellite and admired him intensely, thinking him the complete man of the world. Vining had once met Delysia, and the Prefects' Room had heard a great deal about it. He was also a very good dancer, and at the beginning of each term taught Milner, whose home was in Yorkshire, the new steps he had learned in the holidays. When Woodley came in they were discussing the Assembly.

"Nous n'irons plus aux bois," Vining quoted from a recent French unseen.

"What's the Head want to do that for?" Woodley asked. "The Woods are topping, especially the end of this term

and the beginning of next, with the trees all coming out. What's the idea?"

"Somebody's been careless."

"What do you mean? Smoking?"

"Oh, my innocent! Smoking! Woodley, you really are too sweet! What do you imagine was the meaning of the reference to townees?"

"I don't know. Doesn't that chap at the station bookstall do a bit of a trade as a bookie? Put money on for you? I believe Townley said something about it. Is that the idea?"

"Well, what do you imagine they'd want to go into the woods to do that for? No, my pretty one. That is not the idea."

"Well, what is then?"

"The ladies, Woodley, the ladies, God bless 'em. Those enchanting specimens of the female sex with which this town is so thinly populated. Somebody must have been careless enough to be seen with one. And schoolboys must not walk with ladies, unless they happen to be related to them. I prophesy a considerable increase in cousins in the immediate future."

"They'll have a pretty hard time patrolling the Woods," said Ainger.

"They will. And by next term they'll have given it up altogether; so I should imagine that this little edict of the Head's ought to make the Woods all the more peaceful and secluded, and suitable for a quiet ramble in the future. I wonder who's got pinched?" He took a velvet cloth from under the settee, and began polishing his just too-pointed shoes.

Someone passing down the Lane stopped for a moment outside the windows, and then walked on.

"Who's that?" Vining asked.

Milner looked out.

"Mrs. Simmy, I think," he said.

"Ah! The Lady Laura! What does she want, looking in here? What have you been up to, Ainger?" It was Vining's favourite joke that their house-master's wife was secretly in love with Ainger. "Did you forget to send her her daily bunch of roses this morning?" Ainger threw a book at him which hit the gramophone. "You mustn't be cruel, Ainger. A poor, lonely, love-starved woman like that!"

Ainger grinned.

"Yes. Being married to Simmy can be no joke."

"I like Mrs. Simmy," said Woodley.

"Aha? Too bad, Woodley; you haven't got a hope with Ainger about the place. I wish she dressed better. Simmy's probably too damned mean to let her get anything but ready-made clothes in the town."

"I've never noticed her clothes," said Ainger.

"Oh, Ainger, don't! You break my heart. After I put on my pink georgette, specially for you." Vining went into a piteous attitude.

"Don't suppose he can afford it," said Milner. "What does a school-master get, anyway?"

"I don't know. Hundred a year?" Woodley's ideas of money were a little vague.

"Three or four, more like," said Vining. "And damn little at that. It's the worst paid job in the world. I can't think what makes men go in for it. Have you ever looked at Simmy's shoes? And his cuffs are always frayed."

"What do you imagine she married him for, anyway?" Woodley asked.

"God knows!" from Vining. "Afraid of being left on the shelf, perhaps."

"I don't see why she should be," Milner commented. "She's not a bad looker."

"Hm! Not my style. Bit too washed out for me; I like something with a bit more pep in it. But you never know. That quiet dark kind are sometimes jolly hot stuff!"

"Yes, but why Simmy? He's bad enough in class. Imagine being married to him!" said Woodley.

"Imagine being in bed with him!" exclaimed Milner.

"I don't know, Milner," said Vining. "You never can tell. Simmy's probably had a lot of practice. What about that parlourmaid of theirs? Nice piece. I bet she could tell a thing or two. High jinks she and Simmy used to have, I'll warrant. Wonder if the Lady Laura knows?"

Ainger jumped up.

"Don't be a fool, Vining," he said.

"Perhaps she had to marry him," Milner said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean—had to?" Woodley asked.

"You know," Milner went on, "like they do in plays . . . going to have a baby, or something."

"Meaning that Simmy took advantage of her? Oh, Milner! You shock me! Our respected house-master! Where is your *esprit de corps?*" Vining hid his face in his hands.

"Yes, but she hasn't had a baby," Woodley said. "And they've been married long enough."

"Even so, Woodley, there are ways," Vining insinuated.

"Female pills?" Woodley asked.

"What the hell are those?" Milner looked blank.

"You know . . . Charing Cross Road . . . some of those shops. Is that what they're for? I've often wondered. But, anyway, that's nonsense. If she didn't have the kid, she wouldn't have married him. You only get married to save it being a bastard."

"Oh, Woodley, where did you learn that horrid word?"

"Reading Shakespeare," Woodley grinned. "I've no idea what it means, of course. Well, then, why?" He returned

to the subject. "Why the hell did she? She couldn't have been in love with him."

"Love is a queer thing, Woodley."

"Yes, . . . but Simmy! He's old, and she's quite young. Besides, he's a swine."

"Hear! Hear!" from Milner.

"Hear! Hear! Hear!" from Vining. "In fact, if I may be allowed to say so, hear, bloody hear! That's one thing we all seem to be agreed upon."

"Perhaps she wanted to be made an honest woman of." Milner was still pursuing the marriage question.

"There's no such thing, nowadays," Vining said authoritatively.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know the definition of a virgin? A little girl of nine or ten, usually nine. That's what I mean."

"You don't mean that every woman . . . ?" Woodley stammered.

"That's exactly what I do mean."

"Oh, but that's rot!"

"Why?"

"Oh, but it is!"

"How do you know?"

"You mean that decent women . . . people's sisters . . . ?"

"Almost everybody is somebody's sister, Woodley. Non-virtuous women are not recruited exclusively from only children."

"Oh, but it can't be true!"

"Of course it isn't!" said Ainger. "Vining's pulling your leg."

"I'm not!" said Vining, getting up from the table. "It's a safe assumption to go on, these days. You try it, Woodley. Like the gentleman in the story, you may get a few rebuffs, but you'll get the hell of a lot of unexpected pleas-

ure. And as for the reasons for the marriage of the Lady Laura to the Simian swine . . . well, I don't think that will keep any of us awake to-night!"

With a laugh he went out. Woodley shrugged his shoulders, unconcerned, dismissing him, and settled down gloomily to his task for Simmons.

II

LAURA had been down to Boots in the town to change her library book, and was walking home with Maurice Baring's new novel under her arm when she heard the gramophone in the Prefects' Room. For a moment, as she passed, she looked in at the group of boys; something in the cheery tune and the careless, sprawling attitudes of the four gave her a sudden pang of loneliness and jealousy, jealousy for the youth and high spirits that they symbolised.

She knew the boys only from the Sunday afternoons when they came to tea, shy and on their best behaviour, except for Vining, who was bored and supercilious. They had nothing to talk about, except games and the prospects of the forthcoming matches, sat and listened and laughed politely to Simmons's heavy sarcasm and memories of his rowing days at Oxford, sitting as inhuman and impersonal as soldiers on parade. She, behind the tea-cups, listened dully, smiling vaguely at them now and then, putting in a question when conversation flagged, hoping it would not reveal too dire an ignorance of what they were discussing.

But here, seen through the window, at their ease among themselves, they seemed suddenly human, simple, lovable; she longed to be able to go in and talk with them, though she knew that at the sight of her they would stiffen into polite inhumanity again, as she had seen them, walking laughing through the town, leap suddenly to attention to raise their caps as she passed. Once she had met Milner in the Lane, and walked with him to her own front door in a horrible, frozen silence that she had found impossible to break. She could hardly believe him to be the same boy

whom she saw now through the window, sitting astride a chair, and beating time to the music with a broken ruler.

She was filled with a sudden drenching envy of the boys, conscious of the barrier that prevented her from ever standing for anything in their lives at all, except as their housemaster's wife. "Not a bad sort, Mrs. Simmy,"—that was the best that she could hope for. Simmy's wife; her mind shied away from the thought of what they said of him. It was something on which she had not dared to let herself speculate, ever since a chance remark heard in Crawley's, the stationer's in the town, in her first year at Mallowhurst. "The Simian swine," she had heard him called; and so she, as his wife, wife to the Simian swine . . . Oh, but this was ridiculous! She mustn't let herself think like this. She quickened her pace, and hurried home.

On the hall table a thick letter was lying, addressed to her in her father's handwriting. She put it inside the book she was carrying and went into the drawing-room. Simmons was reading the morning's paper and looked up as she entered. He was a tall, spare, dried-up man of fifty, with streaked grey hair.

"Good evening, Frank." She smiled at him.

"Where have you been?"

"To the library, to change my book. I got your tobacco."

"Oh, thanks. You haven't forgotten the Ratcliffes and the Plunketts are coming in to-night?"

"No." Laura's tone was slightly faded.

"What are you giving them?"

"Giving them? Oh, coffee and sandwiches. Port and whisky for the men. Is that all right?"

"I suppose so."

"Oh, and, Frank . . ."

"What?"

"It occurred to me . . . don't you think we ought to ask Mr. Campbell?"

"Campbell? Why?"

"Well, this is his second year, and he's only been here once."

"I don't like that young man."

"No . . . but, all the same, it seems only good manners to ask him."

"Oh, all right. I'll send a note round. Just for this once. He needn't think I'm going to make a habit of it."

"Thanks. I'm going up to change my things."

Upstairs, Laura sat down on her bed to read her father's letter with a certain surprise at its bulkiness.

It began familiarly, affectionately, yet she seemed to detect a note of reserve in its warmth, a kind of hesitation, which filled her with apprehension for what was coming. She ran her eye over the sheets and suddenly her heart seemed to stop.

There is a tone about your letter [she read] which gives me some cause for anxiety. I know that there is nothing definite to which I can pin my impression, but I cannot help feeling that you are unhappy in your surroundings. This is a feeling which has been growing upon me for some time. I wish that I could believe it to be untrue.

You know, my dear, you must know, that your happiness is a matter of the utmost concern to me, and I am afraid perhaps that you may be concealing something out of consideration for me. When I saw you last summer I was fearful that all was not well with you, but you evaded my questions with a skilfulness that, I am afraid, hurt me a little.

My dear child, is there anything the matter? I am aware, of course, that your position as a house-master's wife may not be exactly an easy one, but you should surely have acclimatised yourself to that by now. I can imagine that perhaps the other masters and their wives are not such stimulating company as you might wish, but you have been

so much accustomed to being alone, ever since you were a child, that I cannot believe this to be the cause of your dissatisfaction.

The remaining alternative is one that I do not care to face. Forgive me, but are you unhappy with Frank? I cannot believe this. Marriage, my dear child, is a difficult game at the best of times, and needs adjustments on both sides. Two years, is it, are perhaps hardly enough, especially considering the disparity in your ages, for you entirely to have harmonised yourself. I blame myself, perhaps, a little, for the way in which I brought you up, allowing you to dream and to be alone too much, selfishly anxious to keep you as a companion to me, but that companionship bred an intimacy between us which I feel now to be disappearing.

To a certain extent that is, of course, only natural. When you married I could no longer expect to retain the confidence and the intimacy which must now belong to your husband, but the fear I have is that he is not getting it, that you are withdrawing too much into yourself.

If I urged you to marry Frank when he asked you, it was because I felt that it was time for you to get away from me, that I had selfishly made you dependent upon me, and that your position as a house-master's wife might give you interests and responsibilities which you needed. If it was not the romance of which, I suppose, every girl dreams (yes, and every boy, too), well, I think we discussed that together, but I should hate to feel, my darling, that you are in any way reproaching me for the advice I gave you, or yourself for being swayed by it.

Laura put the letter down, and stared in front of her. At last she had to face the question which she had, almost deliberately, shelved for the last two years. Was she unhappy? She was lonely, isolated, but she had always been that; only here the isolation was among hostile surround-

ings. At home she had been lonely by herself, in the country, with her books and her music and the hills. She had been born there, in the Lakes, an only child, her mother dying when she was seven years old, and had remained with her father, growing up beside him, keeping house for him, reading with him, playing duets with him on the piano, not going away to school, but learning all she knew from him. He was a kindly, elderly man, who had retired from the world on a legacy a year before she was born, content to live alone with his gods, Wordsworth and Ruskin and William Morris. He wanted Laura to be his ideal of womanhood, an ideal based on *Sesame and Lilies*. She saw nobody but him and their few neighbours, and the visitors who came in the summer time, to whom they let the spare room in the cottage. That was how she had met first Pat Lister and afterwards Simmons.

Pat Lister had been a healthy young solicitor of twenty-four, square and unimaginative, the sort of young man whose appearance suggests brogue shoes. He looked like an advertisement for shaving soap or collars. He sang sea chanties and folk-songs in the evenings after supper; in the daytime he walked and climbed strenuously, and he stayed for three weeks, at the end of which he and Laura were engaged. Laura was twenty-three. Her father did not approve; he found Pat too aggressive, hearty, and unintelligent. Laura herself knew only that she was in love with him, that she loved his pipe and his grin and his square shoulders. Physically, he stirred her profoundly. She knew that they had nothing in common, but that seemed curiously unimportant. He radiated health and vitality and a masculine point of view that she had never known. She wanted to go and live with him in cheap rooms in London, and ride on the tops of buses with him. She suddenly wanted to be different from everything she had ever seen. At the end of three weeks he went back to town and his job. They

corresponded for a couple of months, and then suddenly he grew scared, scared of four pounds a week, and marriage, and being tied, and even of Laura, and the curious remoteness and twilight that there seemed to be about her. The correspondence dwindled. He lacked the courage to tell her that he had made a mistake; he simply changed his address and his job, and stopped answering her letters. Laura turned back to her father, but now with a reserve. The hurt of Pat Lister left her with an aloofness, born of a sense that she had cheapened herself, that her father had been right all along, and that she had been a sentimental and rather sensual fool. Her father did not quite know how to treat the situation; he put his arms round her and fondled her, called her "my little girl," and took her with him to Ireland for a holiday.

The next three years were empty. Her father, seeing that she had ceased to cry, took it for granted that she had got over it, and noticed no change in her. But, as time went on, he began to grow anxious about her. It dawned on him that it was not right that she should be so entirely alone with him, that it was time she should marry and have a life of her own, though he could not imagine how it was going to happen, any more than he could imagine the kind of husband he wanted for her. Laura herself gave up day-dreaming on the subject. It reminded her too poignantly of Pat, who, even though he was now only a memory, was still a painful one; she could not forget the touch and the smell of him, his brown face and white teeth and his sturdy build. He had left her desperately hungry for love, for physical beauty, and she hated herself for that hunger, turning back more than ever to art and nature.

And then Simmons came along. He was on a walking tour and had intended to stay two days. He stayed five weeks. At first Laura hardly noticed him; he would go off for solid, dogged, day-long climbs, and would return in the

evening and talk with her father, with whom he got on surprisingly well. Then, one drenchingly wet day, he sat down at the piano and played for the whole morning. He was fond of music in an impersonal, academic way; Laura had been brought up by her father to love classicism and severity in the arts, and throughout the afternoon she and Simmons talked about music, finding that they shared an admiration for Bach and a distaste for modernity. Simmons sat up and began to take notice of Laura.

In a few days he was being heavily, slightly pompously complimentary; a few days more, and he was becoming awkward and embarrassed. Laura regarded him with a certain interest for his work and his learning, which she mistook for intellect, and a feeling, somewhat akin to pity, for his lonely bachelorhood and the prospect of a lonelier old age which seemed to stretch before him. They went for walks together in the evenings, and sometimes he would put his hand on her arm, and she noticed with surprise that the hand trembled. All the same, it was with amazement that she heard him propose to her. He proposed ironically, sarcastically, to cover his embarrassment, and she was very gentle in her refusal. She expected him to go away, but he stayed on, and proposed again three days later. Again she refused him, but this time was aware of a certain sense of flattery, mingled with the pity that she felt for him. They walked home in silence and he spent the remainder of the evening with her father, talking to him. Next morning her father spoke to her, and talked to her long and seriously, urging her to change her mind. Simmons seemed to him an excellent husband for her, if only as a means of easing his own conscience, which was becoming disturbed about her.

Laura debated the matter for two days; she knew that he was in no way the lover of whom she had dreamed, but

she had grown to despise herself for those dreams. She was twenty-six, and she was lonely. Her father was beginning to grow old. The idea of being a house-master's wife somehow appealed to her; she did not realise how completely shut off she would be from the youth and life of the school. Mallowhurst was in the country, and she loved the country with a love that she thought Simmons shared, mistaking his passion for climbing and his interest in botany. During the last year her father's health had not been good, and she had been forced to contemplate the possibility of his dying, and the prospect of what her own life would be terrified her not a little. He wanted her now to marry Simmons, and she had always been ruled by him, respecting his judgment, save in the matter of Pat Lister, and that was a memory that she did not cherish. She felt that perhaps in accepting Simmons she could finally stamp Pat Lister out of her life. The next day he proposed again, and she accepted him.

They were married almost immediately, for the new session was beginning at the end of September, and Simmons was anxious to install her as House-master's Lady before the term opened. They had a week's honeymoon in London, staying at the Thackeray Hotel, going to museums and churches and the Old Vic.; and then went down to Mallowhurst. During the two hours' train journey Laura felt a slow panic stealing over her. By an unfortunate accident Mr. and Mrs. Ratcliffe shared their compartment, and Simmons informed them of his marriage with a heavy, jocular sarcasm. Mr. Ratcliffe was embarrassed, and Mrs. Ratcliffe was thrilled. She was a tiny, bird-like, false-toothed woman, with a high-pitched laugh and an unceasing flow of talk. She thought it all too exciting and romantic for words, and whoever would have thought it of Mr. Simmons? She sat next to Laura, and held her

hand and talked to her all the way down, giving her a mass of information, advice, warning, gossip and scandal, until her brain reeled.

"My dear, I'm sure you'll be very happy at Mallowhurst," she said. "Of course you'll probably find it all a little strange and difficult at first, and no doubt you'll make mistakes, just through inexperience of course. One has to be very careful. There's so much jealousy and intrigue, the least little thing will be seized on and magnified, you wouldn't believe. And forgive me saying so, my dear, but you are very young to be a house-master's wife . . . it's a position of great responsibility, as I know only too well . . . very young, and very pretty, if I may say so. Almost too pretty. He! he!" She tittered softly. "But I can see that you're a sensible girl . . . you must be, or Mr. Simmons would never have married you. . . . Oh, you know what I mean . . . not one of these flighty modern flappers. And with a little tact and a little care I'm sure you'll find everything go smoothly and easily, and if there's any help or advice that I can give you, I do hope that you will come to me. You will, now, won't you?"

Laura smiled feebly and assured her that she would.

Jealousy and intrigue! She discovered that Mrs. Ratcliffe had been right when she used those words: only she was responsible for a great deal of it herself. In her first two terms Laura made the mistake of trusting everyone, of trying to be simple, natural, and sincere, giving her opinions frankly. She was brought up short by a revolting piece of tale-bearing on the part of Mrs. Ratcliffe, who had repeated to Mrs. Plunkett what Laura had said about Mr. Plunkett's Sunday evening "Christian spirit" addresses. Suddenly she found that the whole existence of the Common Room and their wives was a network of jealous back-biting, malice, envy, and wire-pulling. She awoke to the realisation with horror, but once she had become aware of it,

every day brought fresh evidence of petty perfidy. She even found herself becoming hypocritical as a weapon of defence in her mistrust of those around her. She retired entirely within herself, knowing perfectly well that she would be stamped as superior and stand-offish for doing so. She was forced to admit, too, that her husband was not untainted by that spirit; he had no friends in the school, only temporary allies, who might at any moment desert and go over to the enemy. He trusted no one; he was spiteful and uncharitable in his judgments. He talked a great deal in his addresses to the House of "Esprit de corps," and of "Loyalty and Co-operation," but in his own personal relations he appeared to have no conception of the meaning of the words. Laura strove to believe that it was the system which was responsible. When she tackled him on the question he said:

"They're all out for themselves, every man-jack of them. Those who aren't house-masters want to be, and those who are, are jealous for their Houses. And they're jealous of my influence with the Head. They all try and curry favour with the Board of Governors. Old Hollis is retiring next year, and they're all out for his House. There isn't a trick they wouldn't stoop to, to get it. Do you wonder that I don't trust them?"

The argument seemed to go round in a circle; each was petty and under-handed because he didn't trust the next man. The masters' wives, having less to do than their husbands, were a little worse, and their tea-parties were orgies of gossip and intrigue. They had developed backbiting to a fine art. There were times when Laura felt that she might be living at the Court of Mary, Queen of Scots, for all the security that there was in her personal relations. The thing began to be an obsession with her. She ceased attending school functions, shut herself up with her books and her music and her flowers. She had a

charming garden and devoted a good deal of time to it. It was only by degrees that she realised Simmons for what he was, an embittered, disappointed, resentful man. He had been twenty-five years at Mallowhurst, and a housemaster for ten. He dreamed of a Headship elsewhere, always pulling wires and toadying to achieve it. He had applied for six, and lost them all; in only one case had he even been on the Short List. He had grown sour and spiteful, a brooding mass of envy and mistrust.

And now her father's letter brought her definitely face to face with her own life. Was she unhappy? Was she unhappy with Simmons? She had never loved him; she knew that; she had married him knowing it, but he was not what she had believed him to be when she had married him. She had had a shock the first time she saw him in contact with the boys, at a reception he had given to the whole House in her honour, at the beginning of her first term. He had made a speech, patronising, pompous, sarcastic; and afterwards had walked about the room with her, chatting condescendingly to the prefects and indulging in elephantine, avuncular jocosity with the smaller boys. She herself, reduced to a terrified shyness by the situation, her first contact with the boys, was paralysed by his attitude. She had spoken to him about it afterwards, and the result had not been satisfactory.

"My dear Laura," he had said, "please get it into your head, here and now, once and for all, that any ideas of fraternisation are ridiculous and impracticable. There has got to be a barrier between master and boy, if there is going to be any respect. I haven't been a schoolmaster for twenty-five years for nothing. Your point of view is very charming and idealistic, but it doesn't work out in practice. Boys are like servants; they don't respect you if you try to treat them as equals. It's fatal."

She had not tried to argue. She had already learned the

impossibility of arguing with a schoolmaster; she realised, too, that he did not want her to argue, did not want her to talk, did not want her to do anything, apparently, except be on hand to listen, and keep his house, and order his meals, and do odd jobs of secretarial work for him. He was proud of her, proud of having a young and attractive wife. Laura was rather beautiful: Dodson, the art master, did a pastel drawing of her, which he gave them for a wedding present. It showed her pale and dark, her face level-browed, with soft, black hair and a full, flower-like mouth. She had a slender lovely neck and throat; in the drawing her head was slightly raised and turned, showing an amazing beauty of line. She was tall and graceful, with beautiful hands. An elderly gentleman, whom they had met in Ireland, had told her father that she reminded him of Etain in *The Immortal Hour*.

There was a step outside the door, and Simmons came in.

"A letter from your father?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing." She folded the letter quickly in half.

"Can I see?"

"There's nothing to see." She tore it in pieces, went over and threw them in the waste-paper basket.

He looked at her suspiciously.

"Why do you do that?"

"I don't know. What shall I wear to-night, Frank?"

"Wear? How do I know? Why ask me? That red thing."

She went over to the wardrobe and took out a dark, wine-coloured frock.

"Laura, is anything the matter?"

"Matter? No. Why?"

"You're behaving very curiously."

"Am I? I'm sorry."

"Are you hiding something from me? What did your father say?"

"I've told you. Nothing."

"Oh, very well. Make a mystery of it. You adore mysteries, don't you? They're so romantic."

"Yes." She began to take off her dress. He looked at the waste-paper basket and went out.

Laura stood in the middle of the room, hearing him go downstairs. She felt as though something had been said that she had not understood, that she must strive to keep from remembering, because the realisation would be more than she could bear. She felt she must not think, that she must exert all her efforts to keep her mind from working. It was as though she were coming round from an anæsthetic, gradually, sickeningly dragged back to feeling, conscious of something painful and unpleasant just beyond her reach, that would slowly dawn on her brain which struggled, self-protective, to keep it in the background.

She sat down at the dressing-table and began to do her hair, and then suddenly fell forward with her face on her arms, weeping. She did not know why she was weeping; there was no actual grief formulated in her mind; it was the first time she had wept since her marriage, and she lay now sobbing passively, as though it were someone else within her weeping for a sorrow that she did not understand. She remained there for a long time, then straightened herself and went on with her toilet. She bathed her eyes, put on the dark dress, and went downstairs with her book.

Dinner was entirely silent. At nine o'clock the Ratcliffes and the Plunketts arrived together. Plunkett was a tall, heavy mass of a man with a bellowing voice and Die-hard Conservative principles, his whole attitude towards life being one of hearty bluster, shouting down opposition and disagreement so that he need not hear it. His wife was a

faint, exhausted lady, who had brought her knitting, at which she seemed too tired to work. They arranged themselves round the drawing-room, and the parlourmaid began serving coffee.

A few moments later Campbell was announced; an attractive, likeable young man with a habit of sincerity and outspokenness which was unfortunate in his surroundings. He was in his second year and taught English, and Plunkett thought him Radical and dangerous. In his first year, being keen on games and finding little opportunity for playing them, he had, as a second best, joined the Mallowhurst Town Soccer team and played one strenuous and hearty game with them, to be informed immediately afterwards, by all the senior masters in turn, that such a thing was undignified, and not to be tolerated. After a battle to assert his independence, he capitulated, bought an Austin Seven to enable him to get to the golf course eight miles away, and then committed the even more heinous offence of taking three of the prefects over with him on a Sunday afternoon. After that he played golf with members of the Club, which was considered somehow traitorous to the school, but could not very well be objected to.

He came in now with a good-natured assurance that was less sincere than it would have been a year ago; his manner of late had acquired a half-conscious note of defiance. He shook hands all round and was greeted with a faintly hostile semblance of cordiality. Mrs. Plunkett looked across at Laura, as though she knew that Campbell's presence there was due to her suggestion, and that Mr. Simmons would never have been so tactless as to invite him with the Plunketts.

Laura felt suddenly that she and Campbell were allies and smiled at him, aware that Mrs. Plunkett was watching her. He sat down opposite her; she noticed that he was the only one of the four men whose collar was pinned, or

whose socks kept up. Plunkett was already showing a hairy patch of shin. He thought it dandified and effeminate to wear suspenders.

The conversation turned on the Head's banning of Mallow Woods. Laura had not heard of it.

"Mallow Woods?" she said. "Why? They're lovely."

"Oh, but Mrs. Simmons! Do you mean to say you don't know?" Mrs. Plunkett asked in feeble surprise.

"Know? Know what?"

"All the trouble there's been."

"Oh, my dear!" Mrs. Ratcliffe's tone spoke volumes.

"No. I don't know. What trouble? I don't know anything. I never meddle in school matters."

"Meddle? My dear Mrs. Simmons . . ." Mrs. Plunkett was pained.

"I should hardly call interest meddling." Plunkett didn't like Laura. He thought her neurotic. He liked labelling people; it helped him to know why he disliked them. Once he had given them a label he didn't have to think about them any more.

"I'm sorry. I suppose it's dreadful of me, but I really don't know. What has been happening? Do you know, Frank?"

"Naturally."

"You never told me anything."

"You didn't appear to be interested."

The conversation seemed suddenly to have become an attack on her.

"Well, won't you tell me now?"

There was a silence. Laura felt that they didn't want her to know; so long as she remained ignorant she was in the wrong and they had the advantage of her, an advantage they were anxious not to yield. Then Mrs. Ratcliffe pulled herself together, licked her lips, and got ready to impart the scandal.

"Well, of course, it's very disgraceful and most unfortunate," she rattled, "and I must say I approve of the Head's attitude, and so does Mr. Ratcliffe, though of course it won't entirely stop it, I suppose . . . that is, if this is anything more than an exception . . . but it would at least make it much more difficult. . . ."

"But what?" Laura asked.

"One of the boys has been seen walking out with a shop-girl from the town. That's all the mystery is." Campbell spoke quickly and bluntly.

Mrs. Ratcliffe glared at him. Her story was spoiled, and the atmosphere that they had all been so carefully creating, heavy, important, laden with suspicion, cleared at a word from this tactless, aggressive, ill-mannered young man.

"I see," said Laura; and then, after a moment's pause: "Who saw him?"

There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Mrs. Ratcliffe spoke.

"Mr. Simmons did."

"You, Frank? When?"

"Last Sunday." Simmons shifted slightly in his chair. "You may remember I wanted you to come for a walk with me, and that you had a headache."

"Yes. How fortunate."

"Fortunate, Mrs. Simmons?" Mrs. Plunkett looked at her with a weary questioning.

"I think so," said Laura. "I hate playing the spy."

"Really, Mrs. Simmons, surely that's a little unfair," said Mr. Ratcliffe, tapping his pipe against the inch-thick sole of his boot.

"Yes, perhaps. I meant that I hate telling tales. You told the Head, of course?" She turned to Simmons.

"I told Blakeney. The boy was in his House. I considered it my duty to report it. I should expect another master to tell me of a boy in my House."

"Yes. And what did Mr. Blakeney do? Did he go to the Head?"

"Mr. Blakeney behaved very badly," said Mrs. Ratcliffe. "He didn't want the matter taken up."

"Pusillanimous." Plunkett affixed another label.

"Surely he was entitled to decide, if, as you say, the boy was in his House?" Laura asked.

"Scarcely, in a matter of this magnitude. You don't understand these things, Laura."

"No. How did the Head come to hear of it, then?"

"Mr. Simmons went to him," said Mrs. Ratcliffe, "and very rightly."

"And the boy?"

Again there was a pause.

"We don't know who he was," said Mrs. Ratcliffe.

"Then how . . . ?"

"He was wearing his House colours."

"Careless of him," said Campbell.

"And so the woods are out of bounds?" Laura said.

"They are from now on. The Head announced it in Assembly this afternoon."

"What a pity. They're lovely at this time of the year."

"They are jolly, aren't they?" Campbell said.

"I picked those primroses there, yesterday." Laura looked up at a bowl on the mantelpiece.

"I don't think the boys are particularly interested in primroses, my dear," said Simmons. "I haven't noticed any tendency towards flower-gathering excursions."

The maid came in with whisky and a siphon and a decanter of port on a tray. Simmons rose and began dispensing drinks.

"These shop-girls are disgraceful," said Mrs. Ratcliffe. "Something ought to be done about them."

"I wonder what could be?" Laura said.

"Couldn't they have men in the shops, the ones that the boys go to, anyway?" asked Mrs. Plunkett.

"And that new girl in Crawley's. Positively brazen. I've seen her ogling the prefects time and time again."

"I should imagine the prefects would hate that," Laura said.

"Not a bit of it. Flatters 'em. Makes 'em think they're men," Plunkett declared.

"Well, anyway, is it so very serious?"

"My dear Mrs. Simmons, the boys are gentlemen. At least we hope so," said Mr. Ratcliffe.

"Yes, that was exactly what I meant."

Simmons turned and looked at her from the sideboard, and she returned his gaze squarely. She knew that she was behaving badly, that she was being deliberately perverse and annoying. She knew, too, that they had right on their side and that her point of view was indefensible, and, guiltily, was aware of Campbell as an audience, believing him to share her feelings. She could not stop herself; somewhere, behind it all, was misery and panic. Campbell took out his cigarette-case. It was a thin, graceful silver one, and she saw Mrs. Ratcliffe making a mental calculation over the ratio of its value to what she knew his salary to be. The other men were smoking pipes, and he offered cigarettes to the ladies. She believed him to be doing it deliberately, as a challenge, and she took one. He lighted it for her and returned to his seat, taking a whisky from Simmons.

"Are you going to the Sports next week?" Mrs. Plunkett was trying to make conversation.

"Are they next week? I suppose so. I didn't know. Yes, I enjoyed last year's Sports." The last sentence was thrown in to make amends for her ignorance.

"Naturally. Your husband's House walked off with most of the cups." Plunkett leaned across his wife for the

matches, and began to relight his pipe, biting on the stem with black, broken teeth.

"Yes, I remember. Ainger's a good runner, and Woodley can jump." Laura felt quite professional as she said that.

"That's an interesting boy," said Campbell.

"Who? Woodley? Superior young cub. Writes poetry, doesn't he? I suppose you encourage him in that?" Plunkett asked.

"Yes, I do rather."

"Is that quite normal?" Mrs. Plunkett wanted to know.

"I should have thought so."

"Oh, but I mean poets . . . of course, I've never known any, but one always does think of them as different, somehow, doesn't one? If you know what I mean."

"Does Woodley write poetry?" asked Laura.

"Yes. Not bad either. Imitative, of course, but it shows promise."

"How interesting. I'd like to read it."

"I daresay I could get him to give me some copies if you'd care to see them."

"My dear Laura, what *do* you want to read Woodley's poetry for? Anyway, I don't approve of it. He writes it in my class. I agree with Mrs. Plunkett; it isn't normal in a boy."

"What is?" Laura was startled to hear Campbell get the question out a second before she herself could, and then felt suddenly panic-stricken, realising that the thing was going too far. She threw away her cigarette.

"I imagine most of us have tried to write when we were young," she said.

"I never did," said Mrs. Plunkett.

"I did," chimed in Mrs. Ratcliffe brightly. "Only I never would show them to anybody. I was much too shy. And Charles used to write, too. He had one of his things published when he was at Cambridge. I'm always telling him what a pity it is he didn't keep it up."

The conversation eased its way into safer channels, and they maintained it manfully until half-past ten. Then they all went home. Simmons came back into the drawing-room from seeing them off at the front door. Laura was standing, staring at the dying remnants of their economical fire. Simmons shut the door.

"Well, Laura?" he said. "Do you feel inclined to offer any explanation of your behaviour this evening?"

"My behaviour?"

"Oh, don't pretend you don't know what I mean."

"No. I know what you mean." She turned to him. "I'm sorry, Frank. It was hateful of me, but I couldn't help it. I just felt like that."

"Why, may I ask?"

"They're all so awful. It all seemed so awful."

"What?"

"Everything. Their attitude to everything. All this business about Mallow Woods."

"And what was so awful about that? Their attitude happens to be mine. Ratcliffe and Plunkett have been on my side from the beginning in that."

"I'm sure they have." She was looking with distaste at the pile of withered black matches in the ash-tray by Plunkett's chair.

"And what does that mean?"

"I don't know. I suppose it means that I disapprove of school, and schoolmasters, and discipline, and everything that everything here stands for."

"How nice!"

She laughed. "It does seem absurd, doesn't it? I'm sorry, Frank. It's ridiculous of me, I know, but it all seems to me so . . . so sneaking, so contemptible."

"Indeed?"

"I know I'm wrong. I know there's nothing to be said for my point of view, and that you're right and that all this tale-bearing to the Head and going behind each

other's backs is all part of the system, and that boys can't be allowed to walk out with shop-girls, and that you've got to look after them and stop them doing things, for their own good and the good of the school. Only I just don't see it that way, that's all."

"You should have taught in one of those co-educational, Continental schools, my dear, where they go in for free love and psycho-analysis on a mountain-side, without any clothes on."

"Do they? I suppose I should. Oh, Frank, don't let's quarrel. I'm sorry. I know I oughtn't to have talked as I did. It's no business of mine, anyway. I behaved very badly, and I apologise. There."

"Thank you."

"Frank!"

"You didn't consider what a fool you were making of me by your behaviour, by talking as you did? You know how everything is seized on here, and used as a weapon against you. You know how those women talk."

"They do."

"Well, then . . . And young Campbell. That's the last time that young man enters this house. The whole proceeding was perfectly outrageous."

"I know. I'm sorry. I've said I'm sorry."

He shrugged his shoulders, took out his watch and began winding it, setting it by the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Well, let's go to bed."

She took up her book.

"You're not going to lie awake for hours reading, with the light on, are you?" he asked.

"No." She laid the book on a table, and they went upstairs.

III

AT the Sports next week Woodley came in second in the Hurdles, being beaten by Evans of Plunkett's. Simmons was extremely annoyed; he came up to him where he was standing after the race and said:

"A slight falling-off in your performance, eh, Woodley? Is the thought of the Poets' Corner too attractive for you these days?"

At that moment Plunkett waved at him cheerily from a short distance away, and he turned his back sulkily and returned to his seat. Woodley stared after him malevolently for a moment, pulled on an overcoat, tied a sweater round his neck, and then, having no more races to run, went into the Pavilion for some ginger-beer. When he came out it had started to rain and some of the ladies had taken shelter at the top of the Pavilion steps. He found himself next to Laura, who smiled at him.

"Congratulations," she said.

He blushed a little. "Thanks, but . . . it was pretty awful."

"Why do you say that? Because you were beaten?"

"No. But Plunkett's have got the Cup now."

"Oh, I see. The honour of the House."

He looked at her quickly. There was no trace of irony in her face.

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that, but I think Mr. Simmons is rather fed up about it."

"Oh, no. A little disappointed, perhaps, but you did awfully well."

"I ought to have done better."

She smiled. "Well, it isn't as important as all that."

Plunkett came up with his wife.

"Congratulations, Woodley," he said heartily. "Hard luck."

"Thank you, sir." Woodley turned away and began to go down the steps; then he stopped and looked back at Laura.

"Good-bye," he said, and went off to the changing-room, where he found Ainger getting ready for the half-mile.

"Hullo!" said Ainger. "What happened? I didn't see."

"Second. Evans got it."

"Damn your eyesight." Ainger's tone was friendly. "Simmy's no end peeved, and Plunkett's like a dog with two tails."

"Of course. Well, it's up to me to save the honour of the House."

"I'll come and watch you do it. Have I got time to change?"

"Shouldn't think so. It's just on time."

They went out. Woodley felt happy with Ainger; "Damn your eyesight" met the case exactly.

"Good luck," he said, as he left him. "Mind you retrieve our fallen fortunes, or Simmy'll be unbearable for the rest of the term."

Ainger won the half-mile. He came straight back to where Woodley was standing, and Simmons joined them.

"My congratulations, Ainger," he said. "Your performance was not only creditable but highly necessary; otherwise I am afraid the House table would look a little bare of trophies." He nodded, and went away.

"Swine!" said Ainger.

In their study that evening Woodley stood drumming on the window-pane.

"Well, that's our last Sports over," he said.

"Shut up. You sound like *The Hill*."

"Yes, Cæsar!" As a matter of fact Woodley did think of

Ainger as being a little like Cæsar Desmond, but he would have died rather than let him know it.

"All the same, I'm sorry, too. This time next year . . . I wonder where we'll be," Ainger went on.

"You'll be in India, and I'll be at Cambridge, if I get through the Little-Go."

"Yes. Funny to think of, isn't it?"

"I wonder whether we'll meet again." Woodley's tone was faintly sentimental, but Ainger ignored it.

"Oh, yes. Speech Days when I come home on leave. I'll beat you in the Old Boys' race when we're both sixty."

There was a silence.

"I wish you weren't going," Woodley said.

Ainger went on staring at the hearth. Remarks like that embarrassed him.

"Sixty," Woodley pondered. "What'll we be like when we're sixty? Can you imagine it? I can't."

"Rather like our governors, I suppose."

"I wonder."

"You'll be Poet Laureate, probably, and write Odes for Coronations."

"There aren't enough."

"What?"

"Coronations."

Ainger laughed.

"Will you be glad to leave?" Woodley asked.

"Dunno. Haven't thought about it, much. India ought to be rather jolly." Ainger was a Kipling enthusiast. "You'll like Cambridge, I should think."

"Yes. Brooke was at Cambridge."

"Brooke?"

"Yes. Rupert Brooke."

"Oh."

There was a knock at the door. Woodley looked up, annoyed.

"Come in!" Ainger shouted.

Campbell opened the door and came in.

"Oh, good evening, sir."

"Good evening. Are you working? Am I disturbing you?"

"No. As a matter of fact I ought to be working for you." Woodley grinned; he was at his ease with Campbell. "Essay on why people don't like literature. I could go on for ever on that subject. My trouble's going to be holding myself in."

"Well, remember I've got to read it, that's all."

"You can hand over your surplus material to me," laughed Ainger. "I haven't an idea in my head."

"Don't you know why you don't like it, Ainger?" Campbell smiled.

"Lack of brains, I think. I like detective stories."

"So I see." There was one in Ainger's hand. "So do I, as a matter of fact. I'll borrow that when you've done with it. Well, look here, I won't keep you. I want to talk to you some time, Woodley. Will you come and have tea to-morrow? Or are you all going to Simmons's?"

"No, that was last Sunday . . . T.G.," said Woodley.

Campbell received this remark impassively. "All right then, about four o'clock," he said.

"Won't that interfere with your golf?"

"I'm playing in the morning . . . cutting Chapel."

"What luck masters have!"

"Don't they? Well, see you to-morrow, then. Get on with your essays, and not more than a hundred thousand words, Woodley, please."

He went out.

"I like Campbell," said Woodley.

"Yes, so do I."

"Simmy hates him. Wonder what he thinks of Simmy.

Wish I could ask him. What'd he do if I did, do you think?"

"Tell you to go to hell."

"And get sacked for teaching the boys bad language? Where did you learn that naughty word? Please, sir, Mr. Campbell taught it me. Do you remember Vining trying to be funny, and asking him what a brothel was? And him saying he wasn't old enough to be asked questions like that? Good score off Vining, that was."

"Yes, I liked Campbell for that. Vining's never tried again since. Campbell's the only master he's got any respect for."

"Can't say I blame him. Didn't he take Loveday and Miller and Chase up to golf with him last year? Wish he'd take us."

"I believe there was a hell of a row about that. Chase told me that Campbell had come to him and told him he'd discovered it was a breach of etiquette and couldn't be repeated."

"What a damned shame. I bet he's good. What's his handicap? Do you know?"

"About eight, I think."

"He never plays with any of the other masters, does he?"

"No. I think he took Ratty once and beat him, and Ratty's never forgiven him."

"I believe they hate him for having a car."

"Well, it's only an Austin Seven."

"Yes, but they think he's too young." Ainger gave a yelp of laughter. "Oh, you know what I mean . . . too junior. Only house-masters ought to have cars."

"Remember the second-hand Buick Simmy bought two years ago? And the wheel coming off on the Mallow Road?"

"Yes. I've never forgiven you for seeing that. Wish I'd been there. The only time I ever saw him in it, it was going quite nicely."

"Well, he only had it three weeks, and it fetched five pounds at an auction after that. Paid for his marriage licence."

"Does it cost five pounds to get married?"

"Dunno. Depends how you do it. Special licence costs a hell of a lot, I know that."

"That's for when you can't wait, isn't it? Well, you ought to pay more for that. I expect Simmy did it on the cheap, and had banns."

"The House ought to have turned up in a body and forbidden them," Ainger laughed.

"How do you forbid banns?"

"I don't know. I've never seen it done. I always hope somebody will, every time I go to church."

"Can anybody do it? Can you really stop people getting married? What a lark! Bateman had a picture of a chap doing it by waving his umbrella. What grounds do you have to have? Tables of kindred and affinity?"

"What's that?"

"Oh, you know. A man may not marry his grandmother."

"A man doesn't usually want to. No, I think it's only if one of them's already married or something."

"Oh, I see."

The conversation dwindled away. Ainger put down his book and settled down at the table to work. Woodley joined him.

Theirs was a smooth, easy friendship, good-humoured and simple, with no depths or shallows and no exactions; only a warm undercurrent of affection, mingled with a slight hero-worship, neither of which was ever quite admitted. Woodley was aware, subconsciously, that they had little in common, intellectually at any rate; that he had many interests which Ainger could never share, though he respected them. But Ainger stood to him for an ideal

of clean good looks and straight-forward honesty, and the thing that, if he had had to put a name to it, he would have called decency. He had no other friends in the school; not that he was unpopular, but he had learnt in his first two or three years a reticence in the matters about which he felt at all deeply, which, combined with an instinctive shyness, bred of a lonely childhood, tended to make him aloof. The other boys thought him a good chap, but queer; actually he was a trifle lonelier than he was aware. He was quite happy at school, and, without knowing why, felt that its rules and its restrictions were somehow a safeguard to him; he was a little frightened when he thought of going out into the world.

On the following afternoon he went to tea with Campbell, who lived in furnished rooms in the town. Campbell had not yet returned from golf when he arrived, and the landlady showed him into the sitting-room to wait. It was a small ugly room with a flowered wallpaper and a fringed red plush cover on the table, over one half of which a table-cloth had been laid. Over the sideboard was a framed coloured oleograph of "Nelson's First Farewell," and over the piano was "The Angelus." A Dyers' and Cleaners' Calendar, hanging by a pink cord on a nail, exhibited "The Bath of Psyche." There were two armchairs in threadbare plush and some horse-hair chairs, littered with books and papers. In the little bay-window a fern in a pot stood on a bamboo tripod. On the mantelpiece were a number of photographs, including, in the centre, one of a grave, pretty girl, signed "Madeleine." In the middle of the table, on a glass dish, was a large cream-and-jam sandwich cake; and there was a plate of éclairs and chocolate biscuits.

Woodley strolled round the room, looking at the bookshelves, then took a volume out at random and sat down to read in the armchair. It was a Swinburne, *Selected*

Poems, in the red-bound Tauchnitz edition. Pressed inside was a piece of edelweiss, and on the flyleaf was written "Terry—from Madeleine. Mürren," and a date of a couple of years back. He opened the book in the middle at "The Garden of Proserpine," and began reading. It was his first encounter with Swinburne, and it caught him suddenly by the throat:

> I am weary of days and hours,
> Blown buds of barren flowers,
> Desires and dreams and powers,
> And everything but sleep.

His imagination rushed forward in a flood, turbulent, tumbling over itself, as though a dam had burst. He had a sense of having suddenly discovered a beauty for which he had always been waiting; he felt a little drunk. He turned over the pages quickly and greedily, reading a verse or two here and there, unable in his excitement to finish any one poem. Now and then he put the book down and ejaculated "My God! but that's marvellous," jumped up and walked round the room a couple of times, then returned to the chair and began reading again. He was still burbling with it when Campbell came in, breezy and apologising for being late.

"I played another nine holes after lunch, and my opponent lost his ball in the rough, and spent about twenty minutes looking for it."

"Did he find it?"

"No, he found a better one. What have you been reading?"

Woodley held up the book.

"Swinburne. I took it from your shelf. I hope you don't mind."

"Not a bit. You know him, of course?"

"No."

"What? Never read Swinburne? And you a poet? My God! Well, what do you think of it?"

"I think it's wonderful. I didn't know there was stuff like that."

"Yes. One's first Swinburne is a bit of an eye-opener. Which have you been reading?"

"I don't know. All of them. I tried to read them all at once."

"You'd better take it away with you."

"May I?"

"Of course. Let me have it back before the holidays. That gives you a week. It's pretty terrific stuff. I can't think how you've missed it before. He's considered a bit strong for schools, but I should have thought you'd have found him on your own."

The landlady came in with the tea-pot, put a crochet cosy over it and went out.

"Let's have tea." They sat down at the table. "You can use my shelves any time you care to, provided you return things. There's quite a lot of stuff there you might like."

"Thanks awfully. I'd like to, ever so."

"Looking forward to the holidays? Don't bother about bread-and-butter; go straight on to cake. And don't wait to be asked. Help yourself, and eat as much as you can, or they'll get stale."

"Thanks." Woodley took an éclair, bit it and found a great deal of cream where he least expected it. "Oh . . . I'm sorry."

"Why? It's your suit, not mine. Here's a spoon. No, don't eat it! Take some hot water, if you want it. Better luck next bite."

Woodley laughed, cleaned up the cream and went on with his tea.

"You live in London, don't you?" Campbell asked.

"Yes. Hampstead. Do you know it?"

"Very slightly. I've been to the Everyman Theatre once or twice."

"I live quite near there."

"What do you do with yourself in the holidays?"

"I don't know. I walk a lot. I like London, and wandering round and exploring. I play a bit of golf."

"I wish I could take you up to play with me on Sundays. Damned silly, it is. Are you good?"

"No, rotten. I don't play enough. I can outdrive my father, but I'm no good on the short game."

"Do you go to the theatre much?"

"As much as I can afford."

"Dance?"

"A bit."

"Night-clubs?"

"No. I've never been to one."

"Well, they're pretty boring."

"Do you live in London, sir?"

"No. Somerset. Near Taunton. Do you know it? Cut into that sandwich, and pass me a slice."

After tea Campbell slung himself into an armchair, put his feet on the mantelpiece, and lit a pipe. Woodley sat opposite him.

"Woodley, I wanted to ask you. Would you let me have copies of some of your poems? If you don't mind, I would like to show them to Mrs. Simmons."

"Mrs. Simmons?" Woodley's tone expressed blank amazement.

"Yes."

"Oh, but why?"

"She's interested. She said she'd like to see them."

"Mrs. Simmy?" Real incredulity this time. "How did she know I wrote?"

"I'm afraid I told her. Why? Do you mind?"

"Mind? No, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, it seems so extraordinary."

"Does it? Why?"

"Well, I mean her . . . her wanting to."

"She's very fond of poetry."

"Is she?" Woodley was genuinely interested. "All the same, I wish you hadn't told her."

"Why?"

"Well, Simmy. You know what he is. Oh, I suppose I oughtn't to talk like that to you."

"That's all right."

"Well, I mean, he's always going on at me about my writing. He doesn't approve of it."

"I know."

"Well then . . ."

"Yes, but Mrs. Simmons doesn't necessarily think the same way."

"She's his wife, isn't she?" Woodley intended no irony. The remark was perfectly sincere. Campbell looked at him narrowly for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," was all that he said.

"So you see, I'd rather you didn't show them to her, if you don't mind."

"I see."

"Well, you can understand I wouldn't want Simmy to read them."

"I don't know that that would necessarily follow."

"Oh, but of course it would. I mean, husband and wife . . ."

Campbell was nonplussed. There was nothing he could say.

"Oh, very well," he said quietly.

"I hope you don't mind. It's awfully decent of you to have bothered."

"That's all right. I quite understand."

"What'll you tell Mrs. Simmons? I mean, you can't say that I didn't want Simmy to read them."

"I shan't tell her anything. I shall just forget."

Woodley nodded.

"I like Mrs. Simmons," he said.

"Yes." Campbell felt this conversation was going to be dangerous, and took a book from the shelf. "Ever read that?" he asked. "Take it with you if you haven't."

It was a fine spring afternoon, and Woodley decided to walk back to the school by the longer way round. He wanted to think, and, once within the school buildings, there was no possibility of that. The town was empty, quiet, shuttered, and Sundayfied; a church bell was sounding softly, and a pale, late afternoon sunshine lay on the streets. Here and there at the corners were little knots of twos and threes, youths and shop-assistants, engaged in desultory, interminable conversation. One or two of them giggled and made noises with their mouths as he passed.

He was puzzled and a trifle disturbed by Campbell's suggestion of showing his poems to Mrs. Simmons. He liked Campbell and trusted him, and knew that the proposition had been made in good faith, and out of a genuine interest. Campbell was the only person who encouraged him with his writing, though even to him he did not show everything he wrote. He dreamed often of some ideal person with whom he could be utterly unreserved, to whom he could tell everything he thought and felt, someone all-understanding, with whom he need not feel shy nor apologetic for his more intimate, more sentimental dreams. Until recently this ideal person had taken the form of a friend, another boy, slightly older than himself perhaps, a daydream for which *The Hill* was partly responsible, inspiring him with a desire to lavish adoration.

He was intensely shy and almost entirely ignorant of women; he thought of them romantically, but somehow

impersonally; he could not quite conceive a woman giving him the understanding and the companionship that he wanted from his ideal friend. It would be a little like trying to be friends with a moonbeam. In his secret heart he could imagine himself falling in love, tragically, intensely, but it was a one-sided imagination that demanded no response; a sort of kneeling, humble adoration of a statue. This was perhaps due to the fact that his imagination ran chiefly to literary heroines, that he thought of love rather in the terms of a knight-errant performing deeds of gallantry for a lady in a bower. The ladies in bowers never made any response; they were merely beautiful and remote and accepting of worship. Of a mutuality of affection, to say nothing of passion, he somehow could not conceive. Motherless himself, he had almost no experience of feminine sympathy.

Campbell's suggestion, therefore, that Mrs. Simmons might be interested in his poems had amazed him. He had never thought much about her, except that she was pretty, and seemed kind, and was a damned sight too good for old Simmy. He had never made any attempt to realise her as a personality. He knew vaguely that she was not particularly interested in the school, that she was seldom to be seen at school functions. It had never occurred to him to wonder in what she was interested; but now as he walked he began to let his imagination grow, to speculate on what she would think of his poems, on what it would be like to talk to her about them. He found that he could only do so by mentally divorcing her from Simmy, removing her from her setting at Mallowhurst, altering the whole background of their relationship. But as soon as he did that, everything changed; she became fictitious, unreal, dreamlike, as the other heroines of his imagination.

He immediately began to see her in a sort of shimmering, mediæval dress, all silver and shadow, with her hair

plaited and coiled, grave and silent and remote, a face, a form, a picture, but not a person, the reality elusive always, two-dimensional, not unlike a Maeterlinck princess. He gave up the attempt and brought his mind back to Campbell. He wondered, with a certain remote interest about the girl called Madeleine, whose photograph he had seen on the mantelpiece, who had given Campbell the Swinburne. He wondered if Campbell were in love with her; and found suddenly that he could not picture Campbell in love, that he could not picture anybody in love; anyone he knew personally, that was. He could not imagine how they would behave; he could not imagine their behaving as people did in novels. He wondered if novels were true; if people, real people, did think and feel and behave like that. He couldn't quite believe it. And yet why was it that he could imagine himself sentimental, romantic, passionate, tragic, behaving in just the way that he couldn't believe any other human being would behave? It was bad form, he knew, to show one's emotions; perhaps one only showed them once in one's life, to the woman one loved. But, in that case, how did writers know? Did they draw on their own imagination of themselves and generalise from that? He tried very hard to imagine a love-scene between Campbell and his Madeleine; he found he could only do it by throwing Campbell out of the picture, and putting himself in his place; and back went the whole thing again to the shadowy romantic unreality of all his other imaginings. No, he didn't understand.

By this time he had almost reached the school, and was passing the hedge which divided Simmons's private garden from the road. The garden ended in a tiny wood, through which was a short cut to the school buildings; its use by the boys was forbidden, but the prohibition was often violated, saving as it did a good quarter of a mile of road. This afternoon Woodley decided to use it, pushed open

the wicket gate and began walking up the path. Suddenly he found himself face to face with Laura, who was standing, hatless and in a jumper and skirt, in the rough grass among the daffodils. She had been there for some time, staring in a sort of dream at the washed, pale gold spring evening, listening to the church bells and the voices from the road. She looked at him and said "Good afternoon" gravely.

He started guiltily, pulled off his school cap and said:

"I beg your pardon."

"What for?"

"Well . . . for being here. We're not supposed to use this path."

"No, I know." She was smiling at him.

"I don't know why I did, really. I'm awfully sorry."

"It doesn't matter. I won't tell."

"I'll go back." He turned to go.

"You needn't. I don't mind your using the path. It's much shorter, isn't it? Only, last year, the Lower School treated it so badly, simply ruined the beds at the top. That's why it had to be put out of bounds. I'm rather fond of my flowers."

"Yes. They were lovely last year."

"They ought to be better this summer."

There was another pause. He felt he ought to go, but he didn't quite know how he should do it. They looked at each other and he felt embarrassed, stared down at his cap, which he was twisting in his hands, and became conscious that the lining was very dirty. He put it behind his back.

"Only a week more to the holidays, isn't it? I suppose you're looking forward to them." She wondered why she bothered to talk to him, why she didn't simply let him go.

"Yes, I am rather. Do you stay down here?"

"Yes."

"What's it like here in the holidays? I've often wondered."

"Very quiet and empty. I like it. I hardly know the school buildings in term time. I'm afraid they frighten me a little. I feel terribly out of it all, with all the bustle and high spirits."

"I should have thought you'd have been used to it by now."

She looked up at him quickly, as though sensing a reproof, but there was none in his face.

"Yes, perhaps," she said, and looked away.

"We never see you at House matches, or anything."

"I know." Still she looked away from him. "It's dreadfully remiss of me, but I think I'm rather shy." She smiled a little. "My husband is always telling me of it."

"Oh, I didn't mean that." He felt he had committed an indiscretion, that his remark must have sounded like disapproval. "Please, it wasn't a reproach. Only . . ." He found he couldn't finish his sentence.

"Only what?"

"Well, only . . ." He gulped. "Only a regret." She started, looked back at him quickly, and saw that he was blushing. She felt suddenly touched by the *naïveté* of the compliment, filled with a sort of amused tenderness, mingled with a surprised, almost disturbing sense of flattery.

"Oh . . . thank you. But I did come to the Sports." She paused, and added, "My good deed for the term," and then, wishing she hadn't, went on quickly, "What have you got there? What are you reading?"

"Swinburne." He held it out to her.

"Yours?"

"No. Mr. Campbell lent it to me. I've just been to tea with him."

"You like Mr. Campbell? He teaches you English, doesn't he?"

She opened the book, turned over a few pages, and, without thinking, began to read in a low, gentle voice:

> Eyes coloured like a water-flower,
> And deeper than the green sea's glass;
> Eyes that remember one sweet hour—
> In vain we swore it should not pass;
> In vain, alas!

There was a tiny silence, and then she closed the book and looked at him. He was staring at her, his eyes very wide, his lips slightly parted.

"How beautifully you read it," he said in a voice that had a sort of awe-struck sentimental wonder in its faltering.

She felt suddenly acutely embarrassed, as though she had been caught doing something childish, like playing with dolls or talking to herself in the street. For a second she saw the incident, isolated in time, as a ridiculous travesty of the garden scene in *Paolo and Francesca.* She felt herself blushing and tried to laugh, but the laugh was not a success. She handed him back the book.

"Well, it's rather beautiful poetry," she said, in a tone that was a half-hearted attempt to apologise for the situation. Then again a silence fell between them, a sudden, living awkwardness that neither could find words to break. The school clock struck six. Woodley jumped.

"I say, I shall be late," he said. "Will you excuse me if I go?"

"Of course."

"Then I . . . I'll say good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He stood awkwardly for a moment, shifting from one foot to the other, uncertain whether he ought to shake

hands, and then turned and ran up the path to the school.

She stood still where he left her, somehow disturbed by the incident, which seemed curiously to have got out of her control. Why should she feel guilty, and, in an unreasoning way, ashamed of herself? What had happened? Nothing, but that she had suddenly become conscious of Woodley as a person, that there had been a momentary human contact between them. And yet, in this, she had a sense of betrayal, of disloyalty almost, which troubled her. It was not only that there was something ridiculous in the whole situation, though that explained part of her discomfort. Why was there something absurd about reading poetry aloud, something maudlin and sentimental, of which one should feel ashamed, as of crying in public? She would not have felt it so two years ago. But now she saw the thing as absurd, that she should have stood there reading Swinburne to a boy ten years younger than herself, one of her husband's pupils, to whom she had always stood in a position of remote, reflected authority.

And it was here, she felt, that she had been at fault, in breaking down, in this moment of precipitated intimacy, the barrier of reserve that it was her duty, as Simmons's wife, to maintain. It was almost like fraternising with the enemy. It had always irked her that such a reserve should exist, but now that for an instant she had seen it totter, she felt frightened, anxious to retreat again to the safe, neutral ground of formality. And yet, she told herself, it was nothing, that she was ridiculously exaggerating the whole affair. If she had said anything that she should not, it was her remark "My good deed for the term," admitting, as it did, a momentary equality of viewpoint.

If she felt that the poetry reading had been undignified and, at worst, a trifle ludicrous, she knew that he had not thought so. Later on, back amongst the boys, he might see it suddenly as unusual, sentimental perhaps, but she

knew that he would not laugh at it, that he would not use the episode as a story against her, that he would not tell anyone, and not merely because the laugh would also turn against himself.

She was surprised to find how completely she knew that she could trust him, his chivalry and his sense of the true value of the incident. And, in the same moment, she reproached herself for her own attitude as compared with what she knew his to be, her lack of simplicity, her sudden self-consciousness. It was her life in the school, surrounded by conventionality and circumspection and dignity, safeguarded at the cost of humanity, that had bred her mistrust of her own instinctive action; that, and the fact which she now, for the first time, consciously realised, that not before in her two years of married life had there been a single moment of unguarded intimacy, a single person to whom she had spoken without some thought reserved, some sense of the possible misconstruction of what she might say. It was the significance of the incident, in bringing her to that realisation, rather than its actual content, that was leading her now to give it this undue importance. Again she felt trapped, hemmed in, stifled, the whole place on top of her.

And there was no way out. She knew that. Simmons would never leave Mallowhurst; he would go on applying for headships for the next few years, and then that ambition would die, and he would remain, clinging to a sort of mouldering house-master's dignity, until he was superannuated. And during all that time she would be there with him, entertaining the other masters and their wives, watching all their petty hates and rivalries, changing her books at Boots, looking after her garden and her house. There would be holidays in the summer, in Scotland or in Wales, or perhaps—it was one of Simmons's cherished plans—in Switzerland. He had not been there since he was an under-

graduate, and he was saving up for a good summer's climbing in the Engadine.

And she would be alone—always, always alone. She would never have any friends, never anyone young to share things with her, never anyone to talk to, whose mind and opinions were not already set and ossified. Around her there would be boys, gay, eager, vital, full of the beat and pulse of life; laughing, shouting, with a buoyancy that hurt her, as sunlight hurts the eyes accustomed to a darkened room. And they would leave, and go out into the world, and have lives of their own, lives of action and joy and pain; and be forgotten, remaining only as memories, memories of graceful bodies and ringing voices. And there would be others to follow them; always careless, strong, and poignant, a continual stream of young life, renewing itself as the trees burst into new life each spring. And she would grow old in the midst of their youth.

She could hear the boys now, their voices softened by the distance; saw a couple of them running full tilt along the road, fearful of being late for Chapel. The Chapel bell was sounding gently through the evening sunlight; there was a peace, a completeness about the place, that she found hard to bear. Here, life was in its springtime, and she was outside it, forced to keep aloof, while something was bursting for growth and freedom within her breast. In the holidays, when it was still and empty, she could endure the place; it was the contrast of the thoughtlessly callous happiness of the boys with her own cloistered sterility that she found hard to bear. Alone; always alone.

In a month or so she would be twenty-eight. Was that young or old? Young for Simmons, for her position as house-master's wife, young for all the solemnity and seclusion of the life she led; but old, old, old for all that she desired, all that she had missed, all that she should have had. The years slipping, slipping away like water; one day

to be really old, and to have had nothing of life, to have been cheated, to have cheated herself. . . .

The incident with Woodley had passed from her memory now, save for what it stood for as a realisation of her position. For a moment she had been frightened, seeing his eyes wide and shining and his face a little flushed, seeing him suddenly as a person stirred by an emotion she could share and understand, an emotion, indeed, that she herself had begotten. But that had been transient, leaving her only with a sense of vain regret for a beauty that she could not make a part of her life. She had forgotten him now, save as a cause, a symbol; the moment with him remembered as something lovely and impersonal, like a chord of music that leaves a melancholy behind it for the beauty it momentarily evoked in the imagination.

The evening was growing chilly; the sun had departed and there was a light cold wind in the air. She turned and went back to the house, to a supper of cold meat and salad, followed by blanc-mange and stewed fruit; to an evening spent pretending to read, while Simmons sat and corrected exam. papers, muttering as he gave lavish use to a blue pencil; and then to bed, to lie a long while in the darkness, in the desperate realisation that she hardly cared whether or not she awoke next morning; and, at last, to sleep.

And across the courtyard in the dormitory Woodley lay awake, with the volume of Swinburne on the floor beside the bed, dropped at the moment of "Lights Out"; lay and stared at the night outside the window in a sort of swimming happiness that somehow his day had suggested; a happiness not catalogued or itemised, that he did not seek to analyse; a happiness that was a sense merely of well-being, an intimation of beauty imminent in life. He lay awake a long while, with the regular, soft, deep breathing from a dozen beds around him; and then he, too, fell asleep.

IV

DURING the following week Woodley found himself regretting his refusal to give Campbell his poems for Laura, and wondering if there were any means by which he could retract it. He was too shy, however, to go to Campbell and tell him that he had changed his mind, and he felt that it was impossible for him to approach Laura directly. The incident with the Swinburne had stirred his imagination, made him realise her for a person utterly different from what he had thought her, and he read his poems through again, trying to see them with her eyes. He believed that she might like them. Oh, well, he would write others; Swinburne had opened his eyes to new possibilities in poetry, to a new magic of words, filling him with the desire to sit down and pour out passionate, alliterative verse. Wine, passion, poppies; lips and lids and lashes; the words made a kind of fermenting jig-saw puzzle, waiting to be sorted, in his brain. In the holidays he would try to get it down on paper, and then perhaps next term there might be some opportunity, with Campbell as intermediary, to show them to her.

But would she show them to Simmy? Didn't wives tell their husbands everything? Wasn't that the whole idea of marriage? He had always thought so, but now he wasn't sure. Laura was fond of poetry; she was fond of the country; that much he had gathered from her conversation at Sunday teas. He could not imagine Simmy sharing those interests; and yet how was it possible that she could have married him with this disparity between them? His mind went back to the conversation in the Prefects' Room a week ago, and he remembered Vining's suggestions

which he had, in some measure, accepted. The idea seemed now suddenly repulsive to him, that he could have allowed himself to speak of her like that, to consider the possibility of her marriage with Simmons being what Milner had said it was. The idea revolted him. And yet there was the physical side to marriage; husbands and wives kissed each other, slept together, shared the same bed. Laura and Simmy . . . his imagination shied at the picture. How was it possible? He did not understand the sex relation between men and women. He knew roughly the details of it, but thought of them as something dirty or furtive, the subject of smutty jokes, or belonging to back bedrooms and mean, dark, disreputable streets. He could not imagine real people, nice people, ladies and gentlemen . . . he gave it up in a tangle of bewilderment.

He made an effort to see Campbell alone again before term ended, but found no opportunity. He left the Swinburne at his rooms with a note of thanks, and two days later the school broke up for the Easter holidays.

His aunt was at Paddington to meet him, standing solidly in the middle of the platform as the train drew in, while parents and relatives were running to and fro. She was a small, square, unmarried woman of fifty, a younger sister of his father, and had brought him up since he was a baby, when his mother had died. She was affectionate, but undemonstrative, and kissed him once, firmly and quickly, while emotional, embarrassed embraces were going on all round them.

It was good to be back again; even the stale, sour, railway-station smell of Paddington seemed exciting. Three weeks of freedom, of liberty to do whatever he liked, even though there was little he wanted to do. He was happy sitting in the taxi, staring out of the window at Praed Street, sunny and dusty and beginning to come alive at eleven o'clock in the morning; at Edgware Road, sordid

and busy and already crowded with loafers and women with string bags, shopping; at Maida Vale, wide and empty, shading disreputability into respectability. It was fun to see buses again, full of people going about their own business; and cinemas and theatre posters. And so on up to Hampstead, through quiet suburban roads, past front gardens, neat and orderly, and the trees in the streets beginning to break into green. It was good to be home, in their own house in Redington Road, near the Heath; to walk up the little red-tiled garden path. Inside, the carpets seemed soft and luxurious, the paint new and white and gleaming, after a term of cold barracks and stone floors and distempered walls. Andrew, the fox-terrier, leaped all over him, smothering him with hairs, making frantic bounds at his face, licking his cheeks and wriggling wildly when he picked him up. And his own bedroom, there was joy in that; in his books on the shelves; in the old pile of Hentys and Ballantynes pushed away into the bottom of the cupboard; the postcard reproductions which he had bought at the National Gallery, framed irregularly in passe-partout on the walls; the House-group over the fireplace, with himself cross-legged and chubby, aged fourteen, in the front row, and Simmy, nursing his mortar-board and smiling sourly, in the centre. He pulled open all the drawers and rummaged through his belongings, spending a glorious morning. He was very happy.

But the happiness dwindled as the day went on. There seemed little to do. He took Andrew for a walk on the Heath, coming back to tea with his aunt, to the pleasure of thin bread and butter, and home-made cake, and delicate service. After tea he became more and more aware of a let-down. It was good to be home among comfort again, but suddenly the three weeks ahead of him seemed rather long and empty. He had no friends in London. He began to wonder how he was going to spend the time.

To-morrow morning he would go for a walk up West, stroll down Charing Cross Road and look at the second-hand bookshops; he had a little pocket-money saved, and he might go to matinées, standing in pit-queues. His aunt and his father would take him to the theatre once or twice, he knew. But somehow it was not as exciting as it had seemed in the first half-hour. At seven o'clock his father came in, shook hands with him heartily, with a sort of jovial embarrassment, and slapped him between the shoulder-blades.

"Well, Roger, you're looking well. Taller than ever, I see. Still growing. Glad to be home?"

"Of course."

"That's right. Everything all right? Got a good report?"

"I hope so. You'll see to-morrow."

There was always a sense of constraint between them, of shyness and embarrassment which neither could conquer. They were fond of each other, but miles apart. Mr. Woodley was a bluff, hearty, reddish-faced business man of fifty-three, kindly and affectionate. Towards the rest of the world he could express himself, but with Roger he found himself always inarticulate; their conversations consisted mostly of silences. In the holidays he would take him once or twice to musical comedies or revues, at which neither of them ever quite dared to enjoy himself as openly as he would have done with anyone else. Woodley always felt thankful that most musical shows had only one interval; for twelve minutes he would stand beside his father in the bar, drinking lemon squash or eating ices, and saying nothing except for a few restrained, colourless comments on the show, grateful when the bell rang and they could return to their seats. He was always acutely, wretchedly uncomfortable at any vulgarity or indecency on the stage if he were with his father; found himself blushing at jokes at which he would have laughed openly at school.

Once, at a revue, the audience were invited to join in the chorus of a song, and he noticed suddenly, with a sense of confusion, that his father was humming under his breath. He experienced an insane desire to giggle and then, to cover it, began faintly to take up the tune himself, yet looking away at a box, as though to pretend that he was not doing so. In the final chorus, his father burst loudly into song, and then stopped violently in the middle of a phrase, conscious of Roger by his side. It was an uncomfortable evening.

And yet he was fond of his father, knew him to be kind and generous and affectionate; fond, yet embarrassed and a little frightened. He had never made any actual effort to trace that embarrassment to its source, but there stood out in his memory an occasion, four or five years ago, when his father had made an attempt to speak to him on the subject of his body. He had sat on a window seat while his father walked up and down, talking in awkward fragments; sat and stared out into the garden with his face averted, feeling himself red and hot and moist, filled with a desire to dash from the room, or scream, or do anything to stop the words that were covering him with an intolerable sense of shame. It was not what was said that embarrassed him, for he knew most of that already; with a curious, delicate reticence, he had managed to glean a good deal at his preparatory school, and yet to keep aloof from the knowledge, cognisant of it, yet somehow refusing to admit it. But, now, to have it dragged out in front of him like this was more than he could bear. He had rushed away to his own room as soon as his father had finished; locked himself in and spent the whole evening in an agony of shame and disgust, unreasoning, overmastering. And yet at school he had little hesitation in talking of such things; only a sensitiveness that was at war always with curiosity and with the instinct for salacity which is natural

to every boy. Even among other people he did not mind so much. Sometimes in the holidays, in the bar of the Golf Club, standing drinking ginger-beer while his father drank bitter, he would hear a story told, with a questioning, round-the-corner raise of the eyebrows from the teller with reference to him; and the laughter did not trouble him, nor his father's hearty bellow, even though he could not join in it himself. It was only when they were alone that he felt frightened.

"Well, Roger," his father said as they sat after dinner, "your last holidays. This time next year you'll be a 'Varsity man. Feel very grown-up?"

"Not particularly. I can't quite believe it."

"No. It is a bit strange, isn't it? Doesn't seem any time since you were romping about the nursery, and I was buying you rocking-horses. Solemn little kid you were."

"Was I?" Panic beginning again. Was his father going to get sentimental over memories of his babyhood?

"Frightfully. Always took everything terribly seriously. Always had to come and confess if you'd told a lie. Still feel any instinct to do that?"

"I don't think so." As a matter of fact he did; but he was afraid now that his father was laughing at him.

"Just as well. Won't do when you go into business. What about a cigarette? You do, I suppose?" He pushed the box towards him.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, come on. You're not going to tell me you've never smoked."

"No, I . . . I have, of course."

"So I should hope. Well, have one now."

"I don't think so, thanks."

Why? Why not? He realised that the offer was a gesture of friendliness on his father's part, an attempt to throw aside authority, but it was too sudden, too conscious; he

felt it somehow an intrusion, too direct an assault on the barrier of reserve. His father shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, very well. Don't you like them?"

"Yes, I like them . . . quite. But I don't want one now, thank you."

"All right."

There was silence, and he wished suddenly that he had not refused; felt that it was foolish and ungracious of him; put out his hand to the box to take one and then, feeling ridiculous, withdrew it again, caught his father's eye, blushed scarlet, and turned away. The room was a vortex of discomfort for a few moments and then his father spoke again, kindly.

"Well, if you ever want one, you can remember that there won't be a row. That's all."

"Thanks."

He wanted to turn back, show some sign of gratitude, and dared not. Instead, he tickled Andrew's stomach with his foot. Afterwards in the drawing-room his aunt got out the scores of some of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, and played them on the piano, with him sitting beside her, till bedtime.

A week passed by, empty, idle, enjoyable, spent in walking, or swimming in the Hampstead Baths or reading in his bedroom. And then one Saturday afternoon, returning from a matinée, he met Herpath at Piccadilly Circus. Herpath had left Mallowhurst a year ago, and in the interval seemed to have grown up amazingly. He was foppish and languid, and Woodley had never liked him, but had secretly envied him his way of wearing his clothes, and the ease of his off-hand manner.

"Well, if it isn't young Woodley! And what are you doing in these haunts of vice?"

"I've been to a matinée."

"What did you see?"

As a matter of fact he had been to see *Outward Bound*, but somehow he felt that Herpath would laugh at him if he said so, and instinctively lied and said that he had been to the Hippodrome, and then hated himself for the lie.

"Good show, isn't it? I'm going next week. Some nice bits in the chorus. Well, what are we doing standing here, anyway? Come and have a drink."

Woodley, a little flattered at the invitation from one who, at school, had looked down on him, accepted. They went into the Long Bar of the Troc. "What's yours?" asked Herpath.

Woodley decided to play for safety.

"I'll have a sherry," he said.

For a while they talked of school, their conversation a catalogue of names, and then Herpath began to turn the talk to himself. A year Woodley's senior, he had spent that year at the 'Varsity, and was now completely man of the world. He was bored, he said, and had nothing to do. A "bird" with whom he had made an appointment had failed to turn up. Supposing they had dinner together and went to a show somewhere?

Half eager and half afraid, Woodley fell in with the idea, and telephoned home to his aunt, who merely said:

"Don't be late back."

They moved on to the Café Royal. Over dinner Herpath talked idly of "Uncle's," and "The Bull-Frog," and "The 43," with a casual carelessness that Woodley hated and yet felt that he would have given much to acquire. Smoking over coffee, Herpath aired scandal about popular actresses, and the conversation drifted to the indecent. His stories were dirty but amusing, and Woodley was even able to cap a few of them; but he felt a hateful envy of Herpath, who had gained his knowledge first-hand, while his own was all reflected. Herpath was at home anywhere, had "seen life," and knew how to enjoy himself. Woodley

felt suddenly childish, out of it all, stupidly ignorant. It was time, surely, that he should see something for himself? He was going to Cambridge in September. One could not remain in the nursery for ever. But how did one start? He would never have the courage to go to night-clubs by himself. Perhaps if Herpath would take him round and initiate him . . . Once launched he could get on all right; would not feel such a fool, perhaps. After the show he found the courage to suggest it. Herpath nodded.

"Doing anything to-morrow night? No? Well, Sunday's always a dud time, isn't it? I shall be going along to the 'Siren' in the evening. Care to come too? You know the place, down Tottenham Court Road?"

Woodley did not know, but feigned to.

"Thanks awfully," he said. "I'd like to. Dress, I suppose?"

"Good Lord, no. You'd probably get thrown out of the 'Siren' if you turned up in evening dress. It's a low dive, but amusing. Meet you outside about nine."

At ten minutes past nine the next evening Woodley decided that Herpath was not going to turn up. At a quarter past he appeared, murmured an apology and, pushing through the swing doors, handed a visiting card to the attendant, who immediately became obsequious.

"From Mr. Myers? Certainly, sir. Do you mind signing, sir?"

Herpath scribbled carelessly on the voucher, and handed the pencil to Woodley to do likewise. Woodley, taking it, noticed that he had signed in a false name, realised that he was expected to do so too, searched his brain and ridiculously failed, on the spur of the moment, to think of one. There was a perceptible hesitation on his part before, for no reason that he could account for, he put down Roger Tennyson. Then he followed Herpath into the dancing-hall, a low-ceilinged, L-shaped room, and down the stairs

to the cloak-room, where he noticed a tall, fair-haired boy powdering his face.

Divested of hats and coats, they returned to the dancing-hall. The room was painted with a dirty, sickly flesh-colour; along the walls were arranged small wicker chairs and tables, about half of which were filled with the most revolting collection of men that Woodley had ever seen. Almost all were undersized, ill-complexioned, loose-mouthed, and greasy-haired; there were a number of Jews among them. The two sat down, lit cigarettes and looked round.

"Hardly anyone here yet," said Herpath. "There'll be some women along soon."

He was not wrong; during the next quarter of an hour a continuous stream of women flowed into the hall, all of a strange uniformity of type. Herpath rose, recognising one as an acquaintance, claimed her as his partner and began to dance. Woodley sat and watched, fascinated and appalled. Nearly everyone danced well but extravagantly; a couple passed him cheek to cheek, and he shuddered. The idea of such proximity with one of these women revolted him physically; but Herpath there was dancing with his face against his partner's hair, fluffy, dirty, canary-coloured hair, smiling, enjoying it. He sat watching through three dances, and then awoke to the realisation that he must dance, and with one of these women. His heart sank. He would have given anything to go, but lacked the courage. What would Herpath think of him? He had come here of his own free will, to see this kind of life, and now that he saw it he was afraid. But he must go through with it. Bracing himself for the effort, he crossed to a woman sitting a few tables away, assumed party manners and, feeling himself blushing, said:

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?"

The woman laughed shrilly at the formula, then nodded

and rose. He felt himself trembling as he put his arm round her shoulders and they moved off. For the first few moments he was conscious of nothing but the proximity of her face, the make-up pasted on her cheeks, her hawk-like nose, the stiff, blackened lashes of her eyes that made him think of spiders' legs, and, over all, an appalling reek of scent. If he danced, and he supposed he must be dancing, it was entirely without volition. His mind was paralysed with idiotic fear. He strove to think of something to say; he must speak; the woman would think him a fool. But no idea came; his brain was barren. To save his life, he could not have formulated one phrase to say to her; his mind repeated over and over again:

"I must say something. What can I say? What *can* I say?"

A couple stunted past them; the heel of the woman caught his partner's ankle, and she swore violently. Woodley was not unaccustomed to bad language, but from the woman's lips it shocked him horribly.

The dance ended. She asked him for a cigarette, and he had none. He called a waiter and ordered some. When she took one he noticed that her nails were varnished red, long like talons, and very dirty. He stood by her side, forcing his mouth into a hard, set smile, struggling to say something, finding nothing to say. She did not appear to mind, however, but leaned against the wall smoking, taking no notice of him, her eyes shifting round the room. They stood in silence for what seemed an hour, and then suddenly she left him, and in the moment of her departure he saw Herpath, with his hat and coat, passing out of the hall with his partner, presumably in search of other amusement. It was as though his last protection had gone. He felt himself alone, as unutterably lonely and afraid, though of what he did not know, as if among a crowd of savages.

Time crept by. He glanced at his wrist-watch and found

it was only just ten. He stood smoking cigarette after cigarette until, noticing a woman who was smiling at him, he moved to her and asked her to dance. Again he had the sense of something horrible and unclean. The woman was fat and shapeless; she seemed quite old. Her hair was a deep mahogany, her lips an unpleasant yellowy pink, and when she smiled she showed false teeth and red gums. She smelled of drink. He tried to imagine kissing her, and felt sick. She talked volubly while they danced, and while she talked he felt better; it made her seem more human. After the dance they sat down.

"Get me a drink, darling," she said. "I've got a mouth like the bottom of a bird-cage."

"What'll you have?"

"Usual. W. and S., dearie, thanks."

The waiter brought the drink. She lifted the glass, murmured "Here's how," sipped, and handed it to him. Involuntarily he shivered at the thought, and shook his head. She laughed, drank again, admired his socks, started to trace the design on them with her finger. He withdrew his foot quickly, and she gave a little yelp of amusement. Woodley flushed with rage and shame.

"The woman's making fun of me," he thought.

"Don't be angry," she said, and slipped her arm through his, touching his wrist. "You're a nice boy. I like you."

"She wants me to go home with her," Woodley thought. The idea sickened him, terrified him. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and drew his hand away. He wanted to get up and leave her, but felt rooted to his chair.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Don't you like me? I believe you're frightened. Don't be silly. What are you frightened of?"

He did not answer, but turned away from her.

"Oh, come on," she said, "what's up? It wouldn't be the first time, would it?"

He shook his head. "No. Of course not," he said.

"Well then . . ." Still he made no move.

"Come on; be a sport." Her voice sank low, curiously, almost tender in a wheedling sort of way. "Even if it is the first time, what does that matter? I like you better for it." She put out her hand and touched his hair. "You're a nice kid."

He flinched, and drew further away from her. She became angry.

"Oh, well, I'm not asking any favours—lousy little bastard. What did you come here for, then?" She made a revolting innuendo, and then got up and left him. He sat there tingling all over.

A man sitting beside him looked as if he might be a decent fellow; he was well, but quietly dressed, and watched the dancing with a bored smile. Woodley, miserable and lonely, longed to talk to him, and after a stretch of indecision he said:

"Beastly hot in here, isn't it?"

The man looked at him, a little surprised, nodded vaguely and moved away to a group of women, one of whom chucked him under the chin and called him "Fuzzy." The man seemed to like it.

Woodley noticed a couple of girls looking at him and whispering. They were laughing at him, he supposed. He bit his lip, and stared at them. They removed their gaze. He was, by this time, somewhere near to tears. He felt a hopeless fool, and knew that he looked it. This was the "life" he had wanted to see, the "life" he had imagined so attractive; and here he was in the midst of it, revolted and afraid. What was there wrong with him that he could not join in, that he found nothing attractive in it? Other men liked these places, enjoyed dancing with these women, going home with them even. He looked at them again. They were "professionals" he knew, the real thing; their

bodies for hire. You could take them home to some awful bedroom, and do what you liked to them. That was how they made their living. It was horrible, horrible. And yet other men . . . Oh, he didn't understand. He knew all about it; it had never revolted him in theory; he had told smutty jokes, and joined in indecent conversation, envied men who could boast of their relations with women; but now, seeing it actually before him, it was different. The room seemed suddenly full of maggots, swarming and crawling. That last woman he had danced with, supposing he had gone home with her, what would have happened? Could he have done anything? Would he have enjoyed it? He could not believe that. He could not have touched her. And yet, in a way, he felt flattered, curiously, that she should have wanted him; for a half second, almost regretted that he had let her go. He looked for her in the room, and saw her dancing with a fat, elderly man. She stared at him, then whispered something to her partner, who turned and looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. What had she said?

What was he to do? Should he stay? Should he talk to another of these women, try again, really go through with it this time, prove himself a man to himself? Oh, but he couldn't. He hadn't the courage. He sat brooding like this, with his legs getting in the way of the dancers, for nearly half an hour; then at last, his head and eyes aching from the stale, smoke-laden atmosphere, he decided he could stand it no longer. He redeemed his hat and coat, and escaped.

In the street he gave a gasping sigh of relief and gratitude for the fresh air; looked forward to home, bath, and bed. He had been walking a few moments only when a woman sidled up to him, falling into step with him. He brushed her aside and quickened his pace, hearing her muttering behind him. Good God, was the whole world

like this? He found a taxi and fell into it, driving away with a real sense of escape from danger.

He was utterly exhausted when he got home. He stumbled up the stairs to his room, reaching it with a kind of sobbing thankfulness for its quiet, waiting for him there; for the fresh night air on his face when he opened the window, and the cool, clean touch of the sheets that welcomed him as he crept at last, wretchedly to bed.

V

THE next morning Woodley received a letter from Ainger, written from his home at Cheltenham:

My sister is having a twenty-first birthday [he wrote], and the family are throwing a dance for it. Wednesday's the day and we'd be awfully glad, if it wouldn't bore you too much, if you'd come down for it and stay over-night with us. There's a train from Paddington about three o'clock you might take, and if you let me know I'll meet you with the chariot. Hope you're having a good time and all that.

Yours sincerely,

H. C. Ainger.

Woodley was pleased, and not a little flattered by the invitation. He also felt a trifle frightened. Ainger had once, in a moment of embarrassed confidence, shown him some snapshots of his home and family; snapshots in which horses and dogs and a number of smart athletic-looking young people had figured largely, with Ainger himself standing confidently in their midst. Woodley, town-bred and unused to group companionship, had had a sudden sense of how out of it he would feel if Ainger should ask him down. It would be like a house-party out of the *Tatler,* and he felt that he would cut an awkward figure. Ainger at school was one thing, but Ainger at home was another. Still, a dance wouldn't be so bad; there would be enough people for him not to be noticed specially. The prospect of staying over-night, of baths and breakfast and a large, strange family, was a little frightening, but he

wanted to go. He referred the invitation to his aunt, who said:

"What sort of a boy is this Ainger?"

"Oh, an awfully decent fellow. He's House Captain. We share a study together. I've told you about him, surely."

"Have you? Yes, I suppose you have. Well, if you like him and you'd like to go, I don't see why not."

"He says it's his sister's twenty-first birthday. Ought I to take her a present?"

"I shouldn't think so, if you've never met her. A nice box of chocolates, perhaps. That's all that could be expected from you."

"How much ought I to spend?"

"Not more than five shillings, I should think. I'll get it for you, if you'd like me to."

"Thanks. I would."

So he wrote and thanked Ainger for the invitation, and said that he would go. It would be strange seeing him in the holidays; so far, their lives had never touched out of school. Apart from the snapshots, he knew almost nothing of his private life, did not even know his Christian name, what the H. C. stood for. He knew that his father was a retired Indian Civil Servant, and that Ainger was going out East when he left school, but that was all.

His experience of the night club he tried to banish from his mind, where it lay lurking as a sordid memory that he shrank from facing. His aunt asked him if he had had a good time the night before, and he answered "Quite, thanks." He had not told her where he was going, beyond that Herpath had asked him to go out with him, and now, when she enquired what they had done, he replied that they had gone to a cinema. He hated lying, but realised that if he told the truth it would involve questions and explanations which he could not face. The lie was in keeping with the degradation of the evening, an additional cause

for self-contempt. He felt soiled by the whole experience, and yet annoyed with himself for feeling so, because it seemed childish not to be able to take it simply and accept it. Was there something wrong with him? What would Herpath say if he knew how he felt? Or Vining? They would laugh at him, he knew, and call him "Pi." Though he despised them and their attitude to life, he feared their censure or their mockery, and knew that he would lie again to escape it, and despised himself for the knowledge, recognising it as cowardice. His mind swerved away from the problem, yet harked back to it all day. His father asked him casually if he had enjoyed his evening, and then said:

"What did you do afterwards? Go on the loose?"

"No, of course not."

"Ever been on the loose, Roger?" he went on, jocularly.

"I don't think so."

"Know what it is?"

"What?"

"The loose."

"Of course."

"What?"

"Father, don't!" This was anguish.

"All right, I was only teasing. You getting bored with the holidays? I'm afraid you must be. Wish you had some more friends in town; you're too much by yourself. How are you off for pocket money?"

"I think I'm all right, thanks."

"Well, if you run short, don't be afraid of telling me. Here! Here's a pound. That any use to you?"

"Thanks." He took it grudgingly, yet acutely conscious of his ungraciousness, recognising the kindness that prompted the gift.

"Don't spend it all on sweets." His father laughed, slapped him on the back and went off to his study. Woodley spent the evening reading, his thoughts slipping back,

again and again, to the night before, the memory of which seemed fantastically remote and incredible sitting here opposite his aunt in the quiet comfort of the morning-room. His aunt and those women . . . Had he actually held them in his arms, danced with them, felt their bodies against his? He shuddered at the recollection. His aunt glanced up at him, over her glasses.

"What's the matter, Roger?"

"Nothing, Auntie."

She looked at him questioningly for a moment, and then went back to her novel. He felt that she knew what he had been thinking of, and then dismissed the idea as impossible. Did women know? Nice women? People's mothers and aunts? Oh, they couldn't; it wasn't possible. Life seemed suddenly to be divided into two halves that didn't fit. Those women of last night, walking the streets, picking up men, going home with them; it seemed almost as though he must have dreamed it all, here in the shelter, the safety of his home. And yet it was going on now, every night, down there in the West End, among the lights and the dark back streets. And not only there, but everywhere. Everywhere? Was it true? Was it something that only men knew about, men and the women of that class? Women, were they women? They seemed hardly that, so much as puppets, machines, built for one purpose only, that other women knew nothing about. They couldn't, they couldn't know that people did these things; they couldn't know what went on in these places. But men, decent men, did they, too . . . ? Oh, he didn't know. He couldn't see how it all squared out. He dragged himself back to his book. The evening wore on to bedtime.

Lying in bed in the dark he found his imagination running riot; leading him down hot, foul paths, visualising scenes of brutal crudeness, all that he had ever heard or read about. The woman from last night came back, came

into the room; but now she was not horrible so much as attractive, revoltingly, loathsomely attractive. She began to take off her dress; he found himself wanting to help her, to touch her fat, spreading breasts. He turned over and buried his face in the pillow, but she was still there. He was not frightened of her now. His body was hot and aflame. She was bending over him; she was getting into bed beside him; touching him. He threw back the covers and leaped out, went over to the window and stood breathing in the night air. The street was quiet and empty, full of shadows from the trees and the street lamps. A man passed by, in evening dress. Where had he been? Had he, too . . . ? A clock struck midnight. He was cold, standing there in his pyjamas. He went back to bed. But still sleep would not come to him; images kept crowding in: the dance-hall, and the streets, and dark doorways with lurking figures and couples pressed against each other. Suppose he had stayed last night, gone home with the woman when she had asked him? Why hadn't he? He had been frightened; yes, but why? It didn't seem frightening now, in retrospect; only desirable, grinningly, evilly desirable. He saw them leaving the hall together, walking back to some shabby house, going upstairs. . . . It was beginning again. He mustn't think like this; he mustn't. He switched on the light, and tried to read. He couldn't. His mind kept racing away from his book. What should he do?

He got out of bed again, pulled on a dressing-gown and slipped downstairs. Andrew lay curled up in his basket in the hall, and wagged his stump of a tail. He bent down and patted him, picked him up and held him close, grateful for the warmth of him, the comfort of him snuggling in his arms, sleepily licking his face. He put him back, and went into the morning-room, taking care to be very quiet. In the cupboard were a small silver dish of chocolates and some cigarettes and packs of cards. He took some, pushed

them into his dressing-gown pocket, and crept back to his room, tiptoeing up the stairs, which creaked as he went. He got into bed again, propped up his pillows, and began playing patience on the eiderdown, playing doggedly in an effort not to think. "Red upon black; Queen goes on King; Six goes on Seven; Ace goes up . . ." When he shifted his legs the cards slid about, but he did not mind. He pushed them back to their approximate places and went on playing, playing and smoking and munching chocolates. The night stretched interminably long before him, but it had to be got through. He heard the church clock strike one and two. By half-past two he had played eight games of patience and had finished the chocolates. He stacked up the cards and put them on the table beside him, turned on his side and snuggled his head into the pillow, trying again to sleep, still wearing his dressing-gown, leaving the light burning. He awoke at four. The horror was past. He pulled off his dressing-gown, switched off the light, and crept down into his bed. He slept peacefully till morning. Next day his aunt lectured him about smoking in his bedroom, and he accepted the rebuke quietly, without explanation.

On the following morning he went up West, intending to buy books with part of the pound his father had given him. He spent a long while in Bumpus's and The Times. He loved book-shops, wandering from shelf to shelf, furnishing in imagination a library of his own. He stood a long time reading scraps of modern poetry, wishing it were not so expensive, wondering whether he would ever see on those shelves a volume of verse with his own name on the back. He hesitated over some anthologies and finally bought the two volumes of *Poems and Ballads* in the Golden Pine edition; the Swinburne fever had not yet spent itself. He took them away with him, unwrapped, fingering their newness lovingly, looking forward to see-

ing them on his shelf, beside the other poets. He was walking along Oxford Street, bound for Tottenham Court Road, where he would get the tube back to Hampstead for lunch, walking and trying to read at the same time, a difficult task in the midday shopping crowd, when he collided with a woman. He looked up quickly, beginning to apologise. It was Laura Simmons.

For a moment he gasped in astonishment, and then pulled off his cap. She was the first to speak.

"Why, Woodley! What a surprise seeing you here! Do you live in London?"

"Yes. I say, I hope I didn't hurt you, barging into you like that?"

"Of course not."

"It was awfully clumsy of me. I was reading and couldn't see where I was going. I'm awfully sorry."

"That's quite all right. What were you reading?" He held out the Swinburne to her. She looked at it, drew in a tiny breath, caught by the recollection of the last time she had talked to him, and then handed it back with a smile.

"Still?" she said.

"Yes. What . . . what are you doing in town, Mrs. Simmons?"

"I came up to shop."

"Is . . . is Mr. Simmons with you?"

"No."

"Oh!" The exclamation faded away into silence, and they stood awkwardly for a moment. Then she spoke again.

"As a matter of fact, I was looking for somewhere to have lunch. I hate the restaurants in these places." She waved a hand at D. H. Evans's behind her. "And I'm awfully ignorant of London. I don't know where to go."

An idea flashed across his mind. Ought he to take her out to lunch? Ought he? Dared he? Had he enough

money? Yes. There were still thirteen shillings left from the pound, and he had four and six in his pocket besides. You could easily pay for lunch with that. But would she think it cheek? She was speaking again.

"I wonder if you know anywhere you could suggest where I could go? I'm alone, you see. Do you?"

He braced himself for an effort and plunged.

"Won't . . . won't you come and have lunch with me?"

"With you?" There was genuine surprise that she could not conceal, in her voice.

"Yes. Won't you? I wish you would."

"But . . . you live in London. Aren't you going home to lunch?"

"I was, but that doesn't matter. I can easily telephone. Won't you? Please?"

She hesitated a moment, and then smiled.

"Thank you. Yes. I'd like to. It's awfully nice of you. Where shall we go?"

Where? His mind was empty. He knew very few restaurants in London. His father took him sometimes to Simpson's or the Trocadero, but he had an idea that they were expensive places. Where could they go? He remembered suddenly that his aunt went sometimes to the Florence; that he had lunched there once with her.

"Do you know the Florence?" he asked.

"No. Where is it?"

"I . . . I don't know exactly. Somewhere near Piccadilly Circus. If we get a taxi, he'll know."

"Oh, but . . ." she began to protest, and then stopped. He hailed a taxi, and held the door open for her.

"The Florence Restaurant," he told the driver, and got in beside her. She smiled at him a little shyly.

"What fun this is," she said.

They were silent in the taxi. His mind was full of questions, problems about etiquette. He knew his hands were

dirty; but what did he do about leaving her while he washed them? And what about ordering lunch? What would she expect? *Hors-d'œuvres* and soup and fish and . . . what came after that? Entrée, and then meat, and then . . . ? Would she expect all that? Would he be able to afford it? Supposing he couldn't? What would he do then? He would have to borrow money from her. Oh, but that would be awful! He couldn't do that. Perhaps the Florence was a *table d'hôte* place; he couldn't remember. But, then, that was often expensive; seven-and-six for lunch or something, wasn't it? Well, he could just manage that. But, then, there was wine. He didn't know anything about wine. What ought he to order? Would she expect champagne? Surely she would know he couldn't afford that. He was feeling acutely miserable when they reached the Florence.

Inside, she said:

"Will you excuse me? I want to go and leave my parcels," and went to the Ladies' Room, giving him the chance to dash downstairs, wash his hands and tidy his hair. He rushed back breathlessly, tumbling up the stairs as he did so, for fear of keeping her waiting. Presently she came back, smiling. They went to the dining-room, and he was disappointed not to be able to get a table downstairs; they were all booked. They were shown to a table on the first floor. He picked up the *table d'hôte* menu, and read "Luncheon 3/6," with considerable relief. The waitress came to take their orders. When she had gone Laura sat back in her chair and smiled at him.

"This is most awfully nice of you, Woodley," she said.

"It's awfully nice of you to come. I'm so frightfully glad I met you, or, rather, bumped into you. Do you often come up to town?"

"No, hardly ever. I came up to-day to do some shopping. It's quite an adventure for me."

"Do most of the masters stay down at Mallowhurst in the hols.?"

"The married ones do. The others get away. I envy them."

"I suppose you go away in the summer?"

"Yes."

There was a pause and then she went on.

"I went exploring the other day, all over the school. It was strange. All bare and tidy. Your room, the Prefects' Room, neat and empty; rather horrible. It all looked so . . . inhuman."

"How do you mean, inhuman?"

"Like a prison. I'm afraid I think of it a little like that, anyway; but in term time at least there's noise and life. Like this, it seemed full of ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"Yes. Ghosts of boys who used to be there. Men now . . . or dead. All those old photos of bygone days, cricket groups and things."

"I've never thought of it like that."

"No, I suppose not." She smiled at him. "You're too young." She saw him blush a little, and added quickly, "I don't mean that as . . ." and then stopped, somehow unable to complete her sentence. "But you're part of the present. Anyway, it's silly of me. I don't suppose anyone else sees it like that."

The waitress brought the *hors-d'œuvres,* and the conversation dropped. Suddenly Woodley let fall his knife and fork with a start.

"What is it?" Laura asked.

"I say, I've forgotten all about telephoning home. They'll be wondering where I am."

"Well, go along and do it now, quickly."

"May I? Will you forgive me if I leave you? I'm afraid I ought to."

"Of course. Go along."

The number was engaged the first time he asked for it, and he stood waiting, in frantic impatience, outside the box. How awful, to keep her waiting like that! At last he got through.

"Hullo, is that you, Auntie? This is Roger. Auntie, I shan't be home to lunch. No. No, I'm having it up West. I'm at the Florence now."

"All right," his aunt said. "I don't know why you want to waste your money having lunch out, when you know there's some waiting for you here. Why can't you come home?"

"I can't, Auntie. I've met someone. I'm taking someone out. I can't explain now. I can't stop."

"Very well. Will you be home to tea?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I don't know. I expect so. But don't wait for me. Good-bye. I must go."

He put down the receiver, and dashed back to the table with breathless apologies.

"What did your mother say?" Laura asked.

"It wasn't my mother. I haven't one."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"She died when I was a baby. I don't remember her." Woodley's tone was quite unsentimental. "I've an aunt who lives with us. She brought me up, really."

"Are you fond of her?"

"Yes . . . yes, quite."

"You're an only child?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I don't know. I guessed. I was, too. It stamps one, I think." She paused, reflectively, a moment. "I was very lonely. Were you?"

"No, I don't think so." Woodley was severing the tail of a sardine. His voice was very matter of fact. For a moment she almost thought it a snub.

"Perhaps it was the country. My home was in the Lake District. Have you ever been there?"

"Yes. We spent one summer holiday at Borrowdale. I did a lot of climbing. I loved it. It's wonderful country."

"Isn't it?" Laura's face was eager and aglow. She was leaning forward, resting her elbows on the table. "My home was at Rydal Water. I lived there always until I was married. I still miss the mountains. They become like friends." Her voice trailed away to a sort of echo of recollection, and her eyes grew remote. But Woodley was following a new train of thought that her earlier remark had suggested.

"Did you . . . did you meet Mr. Simmons there?"

"Yes." Her eyes shifted from the corner at which she had been staring, but they retained their far-away gaze and she did not look at him. "He was on a walking holiday."

"Was he?" Woodley suddenly evinced a new interest in Simmons. "I didn't know he was keen on the country."

There was a halt before Laura answered. She was checking a reply. When she did speak, it was in a completely expressionless voice.

"He's very fond of climbing," she said, so flatly that the conversation died on her tone. In the silence that followed Woodley became aware of a hovering waiter.

"What . . . what would you like to drink?" he asked. "Would you like some wine?"

She dragged herself back from her reverie.

"I beg your pardon. No. No, thank you. Nothing."

"Really?" The relief in his voice was very obvious. She smiled.

"Really. Just water, please."

The meal went on. While they were waiting for sweets she said:

"Isn't this strange? Our having lunch together like this?"

"Yes. It is rather."

"And how different from Sunday tea. Do you hate those teas?"

"Hate them?" He felt himself colouring.

"Yes. I'm sure you must. I do," she added, with a little confidential smile.

"Do you? I've sometimes thought you did." He gasped momentarily after saying that, a little shocked at his own presumption.

"Well, you were right. Isn't it silly? It's school, I think. Because you come as boys to your house-master and his wife, not as friends. Like this it's quite different. I'm enjoying this."

"So am I."

"We're both on holiday, that's why. But you like school? Or don't you?"

"Yes. I like it awfully. I hated it at first."

"Were you bullied?" Her eyes grew dark. There had been a bad case of bullying in her first year, and the cruelty of it had sickened her.

"Yes. A bit. But almost everyone is, more or less."

"Are they? I wonder why?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's natural."

"Are *you* a bully?" The question was flung at him suddenly, directly, with a kind of flaming anger. "Do you bully the smaller boys?"

He was taken aback by the intensity of her tone.

"No. Not really. I mean . . . one knocks them about a bit, for their good, I suppose. Not just for the fun of the thing, as some people do. It's a funny business. I suppose it has to be. Kids get above themselves."

He thought of Cope.

"I can't bear cruelty."

"Oh, it isn't cruelty, really. It's . . ."

"What?"

"I don't know. Thoughtlessness, perhaps."

"If you've been through it yourself, I wonder you don't remember and be kind."

"I know. One doesn't though, really. I don't know why."

"Why else did you hate school?"

"I don't know. I was always making mistakes and getting into trouble for things that weren't my fault, doing things I didn't know I wasn't allowed to do. Nobody ever tells you. You have to find out for yourself. And then some of the masters were horrid and sarcastic because they saw I was homesick."

"Who?" Laura spoke impulsively, off her guard for a second, and then pulled herself up. "No, I suppose I oughtn't to ask that." She paused a moment. "I always feel awfully sorry for the new boys. They look so lost and lonely. I want to mother them and be kind to them."

"I'm sure they wish you would." The moment he had said it Woodley blushed. He could have bitten his tongue off. It was an idiotic thing to say. He looked down, and began fidgeting with his spoon and fork. Laura was startled by the sudden, genuine forcibility of his tone, the almost childlike simplicity of the remark, its obvious, unguarded sincerity; and disconcerted a little by the fact that he realised it as such, that he was feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious. Once again she had a momentary sense of panic, of having been betrayed into too great an intimacy. The arrival of the waitress with fruit salad was a relief. They ate it in silence. She tried to think of some subject to which she could turn the conversation.

"What did you do with your books?" she asked. "You haven't lost them?"

"No. I left them with my cap and coat in the cloak-room. I only bought them this morning."

"Really? Do you read a lot of poetry? You write yourself, don't you?"

"Yes, a bit."

"Mr. Campbell told me."

"I know."

"He told you? He said he was going to ask you if you'd mind my seeing some of your things? Would you? I'd be very interested."

"Really?"

"Yes. Why not? I was very interested to hear you wrote. I'd like to read them. Of course, if you'd rather not, I shall quite understand. You needn't mind saying so."

"No . . . no. It's not that. I'd like you to see them. Only . . ."

"Only what?" There was a momentary pause. She knew what he meant. "I won't show them to . . ." she was going to say "my husband," and then changed it to "anyone else," "if that's what you're afraid of. I promise." She smiled. "But I'd like to see them myself."

"Well, I'll . . . I'll send them to you if I may. As a matter of fact, Mr. Campbell did ask me last term. I don't know whether he told you."

"No. I imagined he'd forgotten."

"He did ask me . . . that last Sunday when I met you in the garden and you read me the Swinburne." Her brows contracted for a moment at the memory. "Somehow I didn't like. But since, I've been sorry. You see, I didn't know you'd be interested."

"Well, you'll send them to me now, won't you? I'll take great care of them."

"They're pretty rotten, really."

She looked at him.

"Why do you say that? You don't mean it. You can't, or you wouldn't write them. You don't really think they're bad, do you?"

"No. I suppose I don't." He grinned.

"That's not real modesty, you know, to talk like that.

It's just . . . rather silly. There's no reason why you shouldn't be proud of what you do. You don't have to talk about it too much, but you don't need to run yourself down."

She glanced at her wrist-watch. "I must go," she said. "I've a lot of things to do."

"I'll ask for the bill." He signalled to the waitress.

"I wish I hadn't got to spend the afternoon in the shops. I should like to walk and look at London, or go for a bus-ride."

"Well, can't you? I'd love to take you. We might go and walk about the Temple and the Embankment. It's a lovely day. Can't you?"

She hesitated, obviously attracted by the idea.

"I mustn't," she said. "I've too much to do."

"What a pity. I suppose you couldn't come up some other day?"

She shook her head.

"Not these holidays, I'm afraid. There are only ten days more."

The waitress brought the bill, folded, on a plate. He opened it and looked at it, though unable to see anything but the total. It was eight shillings. He took a ten-shilling note from his pocket-book. She stretched out her hand.

"Please," she said. "I want to pay for my lunch."

"No. Oh, no!"

"I want to. Please let me."

"No. I asked you to come and have lunch with me."

"Yes, but all the same . . . it isn't fair to let you pay."

"Why not? I can afford it." He gave her a schoolboy grin. "I've just had a windfall. A tip from my father."

"Yes. But surely there are lots of things you'd rather spend it on than me?"

"I don't think so. Please let me pay. I'd like to."

She yielded.

"It's very sweet of you. I've enjoyed myself, enormously."

"So have I."

The waitress brought back the two shillings change. He hesitated a moment and then took a shilling from the plate, waving away the other. They rose and went downstairs. Outside, she said:

"I want to go to Harrods. How do I get there?"

"Tube or bus, I think. You'll get one at Piccadilly Circus. Let me carry your parcels."

They stood waiting for her bus in an awkward silence. There was a question he desperately wanted to ask, but feared to. At last with an effort he said:

"Excuse me, but . . . are you going to tell Mr. Simmons about this?"

"This?" She did not look at him.

"Our having lunch together."

She did not answer him, but stared at the line of buses turning the corner of Piccadilly. Her own came into sight and she said:

"These are the holidays. You're not a prefect now. There's my bus. I'll take my parcels. Good-bye, and thank you very, very much. I shall see you next term."

She turned to him and held out her hand. Her face was grave and very beautiful, her eyes sweet and kind. She did not smile, but looked at him with a straight, clear gaze. He whipped off his cap and took her hand.

"Good-bye," he said. "It's been . . . lovely."

She smiled now, ever so slightly, and got into the bus. She found a seat inside and did not turn. He called "Good-bye" again as the bus moved off, and watched it, cap in hand, until it was lost in the stream of the traffic.

He walked back to Hampstead, not so much thinking, as in a daze of recollection, a little bewildered by the incident. He tried to recall it in detail, to reconstruct it chronologically from the beginning, but found his mind lingering

over isolated moments of it, words, sentences, inflections. He could not forget the sudden blaze in Laura's eyes when she had spoken of the bullying. He gave the question a reflection that he had never devoted to it before. He had accepted it as part of the system. Whilst his was a gentle and sensitive nature he had, too, the careless indifference and thoughtlessness, rather than cruelty, that is natural to every boy. He had never actually bullied Cope or the other fags, but he had simply never considered them as human beings. He had shouted at them, smacked their heads, turned a deaf ear to their whinings and pleadings, even though he had never kicked them or twisted their wrists, as some of the others did. Occasionally Ainger's greater kindness made him feel a little ashamed, as Vining's brutality had now and then roused him to a mild protest. But on the whole he had taken the situation for granted, as most people take the class question for granted. Fags were fags, and kids were kids; they had to learn, as he had learned, and one couldn't be bothered to teach them by kindness, that was all.

But now Laura's remarks had thrown a different light on the thing. He began to reproach himself for his attitude, and yet wondered how far it would be possible to change it. Would the fags understand kindness? Would they not rather take advantage of it? Ainger's treatment of them was, he realised, a matter of personality far more than of specific acts, a part of his generosity of character, tolerant yet aloof, that he himself could no more hope to imitate than he could his physical appearance. What could he do? He couldn't go wet-nursing the fags, inviting their confidence, doing their Prep. for them. "Mother them and be kind to them": that was what Laura had said she wanted to do for them. But she was a woman. His own answer had been ridiculous: "I'm sure they wish you would." How could he have said it? He wasn't even certain now that he

meant it, that it was true. Did they wish she would? Looked at coldly, reasoningly, it seemed highly improbable that they did, that they had ever thought about it, that they would respond, even, if she tried to be kind to them. He had spoken, unthinkingly, out of a deeper consciousness, an instinctive realisation of the general human need for affection that a boy's self-conscious nature will deny out of embarrassment, rather than from any basis of fact. Perhaps he had meant, too, that he himself would have been grateful for any demonstration of kindness when he was a new boy, had she been there to give it. He tried to visualise the situation, to imagine a relation of sympathy between Laura and the boys, and failed. It seemed impossible, incompatible with the whole principle of the school system. Besides, there was Simmy, whose very existence made the idea incredible.

He found himself confronted once again with the problem of that marriage, more baffling than ever now that he had had this new glimpse of her. He made an attempt to picture that meeting; Simmy on his walking tour; Laura in her home in the soft, green, luxuriant scenery of the Lake District; but the Simmy that he knew, Simmy of the classroom, sour and inhuman and sarcastic, kept getting in the way. Would she tell him about this meeting? He could not quite imagine what Simmy would say if he knew that Woodley had taken his wife out to lunch. But, then, neither could he have imagined himself doing so, had he tried before to-day. Simmy would be bound to refer to it next term, coldly, cuttingly somehow, speak of him as the "Man-about-town," something like that. But would she tell him? She had not said that she would not, but her words had implied it. "These are the holidays. You're not a prefect now." What else could they mean but that she would not tell? And yet he found himself unable to believe it, partly because of his conception of marriage, and partly because

he could not think of her as guilty of deception. She seemed to him utter truthfulness.

He stopped at a stationer's shop, and bought a foolscap envelope and a pad of Parchment Vellum for his poems. He spent the remainder of his walk home making a mental selection of the ones he would send her. His aunt asked him about his lunch, who it was that he had met. When he told her, she said:

"What a pity. I hoped it was a boy. You have so few friends in London. It would be nice for you to have another boy to go about with. What is Mrs. Simmons like? I'm glad you took her out to lunch. I suppose she's an elderly lady?"

"No. No, she's quite young."

"Really? How strange. I've always thought of her as quite old. Is she nice?"

"Yes. Very."

"Pretty?"

"Rather. I don't know . . . not exactly pretty. She's more . . . well, I should say beautiful. She's like a picture. A Burne-Jones or something."

"Dear me! You're getting quite a ladies' man, Roger."

After tea he went up to his room and got out his portfolio of poems from the attaché-case in which he kept them locked. He spent a long time reading them, debating over his choice, trying to see them through her eyes. He found his standard of criticism changing as he did so; some that he had always liked now seemed to him tawdry, false and sentimental, but he was surprised to discover that others, which he had never shown to anyone, not even to Campbell, thinking them somehow too intimate, he had no hesitation in including. He knew instinctively that she would believe in their sincerity, and did not fear her reading them as an intrusion on his privacy. On the contrary, he welcomed it; he wanted her to know that much of him. He

found the sense of danger in surrendering that reserve curiously exciting and pleasurable. He selected about fifteen and sat down to make fair copies of them. It was dinnertime before he had finished. He decided not to wait to copy the rest, but to send the originals. He wanted her to have them at once, and there would not be time to finish them that evening.

After dinner he went to his room again, and, hitching a chair up to his desk, began a letter to accompany the poems. He found a strange thrill of pleasure in writing it.

Dear Mrs. Simmons:

I am sending you some of my poems with this. I don't know if they're any good or not. You were right of course when you said that I didn't really think they were rotten and that I wouldn't write them if I did. But I don't know that because I think they're good—or not bad—it means that they really are.

Doesn't everyone who writes anything always think it's good? I used to think that the stuff I wrote when I was a kid was good, but when I read it now it makes me go hot all over. Shall I feel the same about these when I'm a bit older? I don't believe I will—they seem to me about as good as I'm ever likely to write—but then that's just what I thought when I was fourteen. How *can* one tell about one's own stuff? So you see I don't really know a bit. I think they're not bad, to be quite truthful, and not a bit modest as you told me not to be, but I shall have to leave it to you to judge.

I did enjoy our lunch at the Florence—it was ripping of you to come. I've been thinking over what you said about bullying, and I can't get it quite straight.

When I said that everyone is bullied more or less I didn't mean real bad bullying like Mollison two years ago, or like you read about in *Stalky*. That doesn't happen much

except occasionally when you get an awful brute who just enjoys it for the sake of being cruel. But most boys get knocked about a bit and lammed when they make mistakes.

I don't think it does them much harm really. They cry a bit at first and then they learn not to do that and I suppose that's a good thing. I used to cry like anything my first year, but you've got to grow out of that and learn to put up with things. I suppose it's life. Oh, I suppose it's not the best way, and you'd say one ought to teach them by being kind to them and you're right, but somehow it doesn't seem to work out like that.

It doesn't pay to be soft with kids, they get cheeky and answer back. I suppose it's different with a woman. Anyway, I'll try and remember what you said, but it isn't easy.

It was funny having lunch with you like that. I've never talked to you before except that once in the garden, not really. As you said, those Sunday teas are all stiff and formal and we all feel we've got to be on our best behaviour. But to-day was quite different.

When Mr. Campbell told me you'd like to see my poems I couldn't believe it. It didn't seem to fit. I mean I'd never thought of you somehow as anyone who could be interested in poetry. I don't know why not—it was silly of me, I suppose—you're not a bit like the other masters' wives really, but I suppose it was just because you *were* one of the wives that I didn't. And to-day because we were away from the school I didn't think of you like that at all.

I suppose it seems awful cheek my writing like this but I do feel I know you well enough now to be able to. Isn't that strange? If anyone had told me I should be having lunch with you and sending you my poems and writing to you like this I wouldn't have believed them. But now it seems quite natural and I feel I know you quite well.

Will it be just the same at Sunday teas next term as it's

always been? I suppose the others being there will make a difference and it will be school again and not London and the holidays. How silly it is. But I suppose it's natural. I shan't tell any of the others about to-day—Ainger or any of them—it doesn't seem to fit and that's the whole point. They wouldn't understand, anyway.

I must stop now. I want this to catch the post so that you'll get the poems in the morning, and it goes at ten. Thank you again for having lunch with me to-day. I did enjoy it so much. I hope you won't think the poems too awful.

Yours sincerely,

Roger Woodley.

He read this through and wondered if she would think it cheek. But it was a quarter to ten, too late to re-write it. He put it with the poems into the long envelope, which he addressed, with great care, to:

Mrs. Laura Simmons,
The Tree House,
Mallowhurst School,
Mallowhurst,
Warwickshire.

He debated whether he should mark it "Private," but refrained. He went to his aunt for a stamp, fearful lest she should ask to whom he had been writing. She did not do so, however, but handed him a stamp-book from her bag, and went on with her reading. He took the letter to the pillar-box himself, and stood rereading the address several times, in a sort of reluctance to part with it, before he dropped it in. Then he went home to bed.

VI

AINGER was at the station next day to meet him, dressed in light grey flannel trousers, a sports' coat, and an old pull-over. He shook Woodley's hand, said, "Glad to see you. Glad you could come," grinned at him, took his suitcase, and led the way to a Vauxhall car, waiting outside, which he drove back to his home.

The house had been obviously turned upside down for the dance. Preparations were going on rather hectically, and people were running in and out.

"Awful bore, these things," said Ainger. "Half the stuff didn't come and my elder sister had to dash up to town this morning. I'm afraid the house is going to be damn full; Mater's had to put you in with me, couldn't find a spare room for you. Hope you don't mind awfully. Let's have some tea and then get out of the way, go for a drive or something, till dinner, shall we? At least, it won't be a proper dinner. Scratch meal and a sit-down supper for the dance. I believe that's the idea."

Woodley met most of the family over tea in the library. Ainger's mother was a smart, pretty, youngish-looking woman who wore a very short tweed skirt; his father was grey and quiet and dignified. There were a lot of other people whom he but vaguely disentangled as elder brothers and sisters, most of them married. Nobody took very much notice of him. Mrs. Ainger shook hands with him and said:

"I'm awfully glad you could come. Do help yourself to anything you want. Howard will look after you, I know."

So Howard was Ainger's Christian name. It seemed very appropriate. After tea they went for a drive in the car. Ainger asked a few questions about how he had been

spending the holidays, and he answered briefly. He did not tell him of his meeting with Laura.

There were about two hundred people at the dance. Ainger's sister, Phyllis, for whose birthday it was being given, was a tall, almost Amazonian girl with red-gold hair. She thanked Woodley for the chocolates, which he found an opportunity of giving her as quietly as he could, and said:

"Get Howard to introduce you around properly. Don't let him be lazy."

Ainger, very handsome, clean and square-cut, in a dinner-jacket, said:

"It was decent of you to bring Phyl chocolates. I hope she thanked you properly, but she was probably much too fussed. Anybody special you want to be introduced to? Come along. I'll drag you round."

At first he did not enjoy himself particularly. He danced dutifully with girl after girl, most of them young and pretty and agreeable. He found that Ainger was a great hero among them and that, as his friend, he himself shone in a certain reflected glory.

"You're at school with Howard, aren't you? Are you great friends? I expect he's awfully popular, isn't he? Doesn't the room look nice? Are you very fond of dancing? Howard dances beautifully. He's awfully in demand. Do you play tennis? Howard plays a ripping game, but he doesn't really like playing with girls. I think it's a shame. Do you ride? Howard rides. Have you met Phyl before? Don't you think she's awfully pretty? Do you think she looks like Howard? Phyl and Howard are awfully good pals. I think it's so nice for brother and sister to be friends like that. Mrs. Ainger's a darling. She's much more like a sister than a mother with Howard and Phyl. They're like a lot of young people together."

This was a fair sample of the conversation.

Later in the evening he found himself dancing with a very pretty girl in pink. She had pale ash-gold hair, large china-blue eyes, and a soft, moist, very red mouth. She danced beautifully, so well, indeed, that he felt that he himself had never danced so well, and she talked very little. She sat a little way away from him at supper on the opposite side of the table, and their glances kept meeting. After supper he sought her out and they danced together again. It was a joy to dance with her. When the music ended, she said: "Let's go and find somewhere to sit." They went upstairs and found an ottoman at the end of a dark passage. She asked him for a cigarette, he gave her one, lighted it for her, and she sat smoking in silence, smiling at him a little. Conversation hung fire; they had nothing to talk about. But he thought her enchantingly pretty, sweet and fresh and light as thistledown with her pale hair and the pink foam of her frock. He wanted to make love to her, he wanted to kiss her, but he didn't know how to begin.

He had a suspicion that she wanted to be made love to, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't know what to do. He felt he couldn't seize her and kiss her suddenly without warning; she might scream or smack his face or tell Mrs. Ainger. How did one set about it? He didn't know. He edged a little nearer to her. Her hand was lying on the ottoman between them; by imperceptible degrees he shifted his own hand nearer hers, until their fingers touched. She did not move her hand; he let his cover it, lie on it, their little fingers intertwined, looking away from her all the time, as though unconscious of what he was doing. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and for a moment, with a reflex action of instinctive fear, he withdrew it and then let it creep back. They sat like that for what seemed hours. He didn't know what to do next. He didn't like to look at her. Inside him a voice was saying: "Kiss her. Put your

arm round her. Kiss her." But he couldn't obey it. One ought to talk, he felt, but what could he say? "You're awfully pretty." That was what he wanted to say, but the words wouldn't come. He rehearsed them over and over again in his brain, trying to hear how they would sound. Just as he was on the point of uttering them, she released her hand, shook out her dress and stood up.

"We must go back," she said.

"Oh, no! Not yet." He spoke impulsively.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to go back."

"I do. I don't want to miss all the fun, sitting here."

He took her back to the ballroom. He stood in the doorway, watching her, during the next few dances. He followed her about the house, trying to find an opportunity to ask her to dance again, yet averting his head and looking unconcerned if he passed her sitting with anyone else, too timid to speak to her. At last, as he walked by her for about the sixth time when she was sitting out, she looked up at him brightly and said: "Hullo, shadow!"

He flushed a deep, sudden red and went straight on, pretending not to have heard. He felt overcome with shame; he opened a door and went out into the garden, standing in the chilly darkness, gulping down mortification. He had made a fool of himself, following her about like that. Why hadn't he kissed her when he had had the chance? She would have let him, he felt sure of that now. She wouldn't have allowed him to hold her hand if she didn't want him to kiss her; or would she? He didn't know. Now she was laughing at him, telling all her partners about him, probably. He felt he couldn't go back to the lights and the ballroom. He suddenly wanted to go home, but he couldn't. He had to stick it out. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve. How long would they keep it up? How much more of it was there to endure? He stayed out there

a long time, and at last went back and sat alone in a corner, brooding, until Phyllis Ainger passed him. She waved her fan at him.

"Come along," she said. "Don't sit there by yourself. Come and dance. Come and dance with me."

She led him back to the ballroom. He felt better after dancing with her, his self-respect beginning to come back to him. She took him to the buffet and introduced him to a jolly, freckled girl, with whom he danced. He did not see the girl in pink again; she seemed to have vanished.

When, at last, the band and most of the guests had departed, the remaining few who were staying in the house turned on the gramophone and began impromptu dances up and down the floor. Ainger picked up a wrap of his mother's and did an absurd scarf dance, until, suddenly catching Woodley's eye, he became seized with self-consciousness and stopped abruptly.

It was after three when they all went upstairs.

"Hope you weren't too bored," Ainger said, sitting down on the camp-bed which had been put up in his room, and beginning to unlace his shoes.

"Of course not. I enjoyed it."

"Really? I'm glad. Not a bad show, was it?"

"You seem to be no end of a hero with most of the girls I danced with. They think a hell of a lot of you."

"What bilge!" Ainger blushed furiously.

"It's true. They never stopped talking about you. I felt quite envious."

"They're a lot of silly school-girls." Ainger tugged his collar undone.

They undressed in silence for a few moments, and then Woodley asked, in as casual a voice as he could manage:

"I say, who was that fair-haired girl in pink? Do you know who I mean? Rather pretty . . . fluffy sort of dress?"

"Sylvia Challis?"

"Is that her name? Who is she? Do you know her well?"

"Not very. She lives near here. Comes over to tennis sometimes. Hates me like poison. Why? Did she tell you so?"

"No. Of course not. Why does she?"

"Oh, I don't know. Got some bee in her bonnet. Silly little fool, I think. Pretty, though, as you say. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. I danced with her, that's all. She's a beautiful dancer."

"Yes."

The conversation dropped, rather awkwardly. Woodley put on his pyjamas and got into bed, where he lay, resting on his elbow, watching Ainger finish his toilet.

"I say, Ainger, do you remember Herpath?"

"Herpath? Yes, why? What about him?"

"I met him in town the other day."

"Oh, really? What's he doing?"

"He's at the 'Varsity. Did you like him?"

"Like him? No. Not much. Why? Do you?"

"No. I don't think so. Not really. I never knew him very well at school. I was surprised how friendly he was when I met him last week. Took me out to dinner. He seemed quite a man-about-town."

After a brief hesitation he broke into a halting description of his evening at the "Siren." Ainger crept back quietly to his bed and sat on it, listening.

"I don't know. I thought it was awful, but he seemed to like it. I've never seen such a beastly looking crowd. And those women . . . I believe he went home with one of them." There was an enormous pause and then, not looking at Ainger, he asked with an effort:

"Ainger . . . have you . . . ever . . . ?" He couldn't finish his question.

It was a long time before Ainger answered.

"No, but . . . well . . ." Then he, too, gave it up.

"You've kissed girls?"

"Of course."

"But . . . the other thing . . . women like that. Could you?"

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, I mean . . . the other night, at that dancing-place, I felt almost . . . well, you know . . . almost frightened. Well, it's bloody silly, isn't it? I mean, the way I've always talked about these things . . . the way we all have . . . told smutty jokes about that . . . and then, when it came to the point, funking it all like that. I tell you, I felt frightened."

"I know."

"But most men don't feel like that. Or do they? I don't know. And then to-night . . . that girl . . . Sylvia, what did you say her name was? I danced with her twice, and we were sitting out together and . . . I wanted to kiss her . . . awfully. But I simply hadn't got the pluck. I didn't know how to begin. Well, I mean, I felt I couldn't just catch hold of her and kiss her like that, straight off the reel. I just sat there like a damned fool, saying nothing. I could have kicked myself. I don't know. I believe she wanted me to kiss her. I suppose that sounds caddish, but . . ."

"Don't worry. She did."

"What d'you mean?"

"I told you she hated me? Well, that's why. I did kiss her once and she made the hell of a nuisance of herself, for weeks after, hanging around and pestering to get me alone every time I came near her. It ended in a row, and now she won't speak to me."

Woodley considered this for a moment.

"Yes, but you did. And I funked it."

"You should be damned glad you did. Women are the devil's own nuisance."

"I don't understand these things." Woodley sat up in bed, a very youthful figure with his tumbled hair and open collar. "That place the other night . . . Herpath and those women . . . you know, professionals . . . and at school the shop-girls who hang about the streets and giggle at you. Some chaps go out with them, don't they? Vining said that was why they put Mallow Woods out of bounds. Well, how can they? I couldn't do it . . . kiss them even; it would make me feel sick. Oh, I can imagine it, sort of, you know, like one does sometimes, but when it came to the point I know I should funk it. And then you meet a girl of your own class . . . I don't want to be snobbish, but you know what I mean . . . someone you could be really keen on, and the thing's impossible. I can't think of them that way . . . you know . . . going to bed with them . . . I can't imagine them letting me. You couldn't with a nice girl . . . surely? She never would. Oh, she might let you kiss her . . . like you say that girl did, like I thought she wanted me to . . . but that's different, kissing . . . and anyway I hadn't even got the nerve for that. But as for going any further . . . does it always have to be common women until you're married? And then marriage . . . I don't understand that either . . . married people . . . I suppose if they're really in love . . . Oh, I don't know. It doesn't seem to fit anywhere. Have you ever been in love?"

"Never." Ainger shook his head, positively.

"You don't believe in it?"

"I never said so."

"Well, I don't see how it all squares out."

Ainger laughed kindly.

"It's a brute, isn't it? I don't know that I can help you much. Things pan out more or less, in the long run. One does a few things one's sorry for, and, for the rest, it's just a question of running straight, as best you can. As for feel-

ing 'frightened,' as you call it, that's natural enough. I've felt like that, too."

"You?" Woodley's tone expressed incredulity.

"Yes, often. It's nothing to worry about. I always thought Herpath was a bit of a swine. . . . Vining's rather like that, too. You don't want to get morbid about it, any more than you want to wallow in it, like they do. But there is such a thing as a happy medium. These things work themselves out. As for 'love,'" the word came from him shyly, "I shouldn't be surprised if a lot of it isn't imagination, or else that it's something kept for a special favoured few. You read about it, you see it in plays and on the Pictures; you're almost brought up on it. I mean, your first fairy stories end with people marrying and living happily ever after. I wonder how many of us ever strike it without being disappointed."

"I expect you're right." Woodley spoke mournfully. "Only I can't quite believe it, somehow."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I mean . . . I can sort of imagine myself falling in love . . . only I suppose I'd be too shy when it came to the point. I don't know whether you'll believe me . . . I know it must sound damned silly . . . but . . . I've never kissed a woman."

He was looking down, fidgeting with the quilt as he finished, in a sort of helpless embarrassment. There was something very tender in the quick glance Ainger threw at him.

"Well, it's nothing to worry about. You've plenty of time. How old are you? Seventeen?"

"Nearly eighteen." His tone was tragic.

"Well, you needn't say it as if it were eighty. We're most of us like that at first . . . unless we're the other sort, like Herpath or Vining . . . and it's a pretty good thing we are. Oh, I'm not romantic, I know . . . you may be the kind

that does fall in love . . . seriously. I don't know. Anyway, I don't know that one wants to think too much about these things, smutty yarns and that. I know I've told them like everybody else, but they set you thinking. It does no good. Love either. If it happens, it happens. You say you can imagine yourself falling in love . . . well, I dare say you will. I *can't* imagine it, quite. I remember getting religion fearfully badly when I was a kid . . . wanted to go into the Church and everything . . . had it properly." Woodley grinned at this. "And then it all faded away, and I can see now that there never was anything in it at all. I sometimes wonder if love isn't something like that."

"In the same way that I've 'got' poetry now." Woodley gave a little laugh.

"I'm sorry to be such a wet blanket about it. And anyway I dare say I'm wrong. That's how it strikes me . . . but probably you're different. Anyway, don't worry. Take things as they come."

"Well, it's damned decent of you letting me talk like this."

"Rot!"

"It isn't rot. I'm no end grateful. I expect I'm an awfully young fool really. I don't know why you put up with me."

"I happen to be rather fond of you, that's why." Ainger addressed this remark to the ceiling. There was a long silence, and then he looked at his watch. " 'Strewth! It's after four. What about putting the light out?"

"Right you are. I'll do it."

"I will; I can reach it from here."

Ainger stretched out his arm, and the room was in darkness. Woodley turned over on his side.

"Good-night," he said.

"Good-night, old thing," Ainger answered.

In the morning they were awakened by a maid bring-

ing their breakfasts up on trays at eleven o'clock. They ate, cheerily, sitting up in bed. Their conversation of the previous night was forgotten.

The next day at home Woodley received an answer from Laura.

Dear Woodley,

Thank you so much for your very nice letter and for sending the poems so quickly. I was most interested to read them and like them a great deal. I feel there is quite a lot that I could say about them, but I really can't write it all now, and perhaps we shall have an opportunity to talk about them next term. May I keep them until then? I should like to read them through again, and they will be quite safe in my keeping.

I hope you didn't think that what I said about bullying was meant personally. But I do feel rather strongly about such things, and I hate to think of the boys being unhappy; needlessly unhappy as it seems to me. Thank you for your explanation. I am sure, as you say, it is mostly thoughtlessness, but that doesn't entirely excuse it. I'm afraid, though, that I don't know much about boys. They're rather mysteries to me. It was nice of you to bother to write as you did.

I enjoyed our lunch so much the other day.

Again, my best thanks.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Simmons.

P.S. Thank you for saying I'm not like the other masters' wives!

He read the letter through a great many times, carrying it about with him in his pocket all day. He found that he wanted very much to answer it. He noticed that she made no reference to the last part of his letter, in which he had spoken of the change in their relation. He wondered if she

had thought it impertinent, if she were angry with him. But her letter did not sound as if she were. He had an excuse for answering it since she asked if she might keep his poems. He went upstairs to his room and sat down to write.

Dear Mrs. Simmons,

Thank you very much for your letter. Of course you may keep the poems till next term or, if you would like to, please keep them altogether. Only if you do that I should like to make copies of some of them. I hadn't the time to make fair copies of them all when I sent them you and about half of them are original manuscripts.

He paused here, thinking that that had somehow a conceited sound, and added an exclamation mark to cover himself.

I'm tremendously glad you liked them, and I'm looking forward to hearing what you have to say about them.

He stopped, with his pen in his hand, wondering what to say next. He wondered how they would find an opportunity to discuss them at school, and hoped that she would not try to do so in front of anyone else, at one of the Sunday teas, for example.

Could he say that in his letter? He supposed not. He must have confidence in her discretion. Should he return to the subject of bullying? There didn't seem much more to say about it. He considered the postscript to her letter: "Thank you for saying I'm not like the other masters' wives." What did she mean by that? Perhaps he ought not to have written that; perhaps it was overstepping the limits of his position as a school-boy writing to the wife of his house-master; an attempt to make a breach in the walls of authority, which it was part of her duty to maintain. And yet, had she considered it as such, would she have written

that in reply, that brief postscript with its half-flippant exclamation mark at the end? It seemed in a way a secret sign of intimacy, a sort of little private joke between them, and yet he could not resist a suspicion that she was pulling his leg. He began writing again.

I wonder what you mean by your P.S.? I hope you didn't think it impertinent of me to write that about the other masters' wives. I suppose I oughtn't to have, and I hope you're not angry, but I forgot that I was writing to my house-master's wife, if you know what I mean. That was the whole point of what I was trying to say—just because you were one of the wives I had always thought of you as being like one of them, and then when I met you the other day I found you were quite different and not a bit like they are. There, I am saying it again! Well, anyway, you're not!!

He felt that he was getting out of his depth, making matters worse. He decided to end the letter there, signed his name and went out with it to the post.

Saturday and Monday he watched eagerly for an answer, but none came. On the Tuesday he went back to school.

VII

THE first week or two passed normally and uneventfully. Vining returned with a passion for *Everybody's Lady,* a musical comedy he had seen in the holidays, some records from which he brought back for the gramophone and played incessantly. He was amazed to hear that Woodley had not seen it.

"Can't think how you missed it," he said. "It's a first-rate show. My brother's been eight times, front-row stalls. Pearl Rossiter's absolutely great in it. She's Battling Sawyer's mistress, you know."

"How do you know?"

"Know? Why, everyone knows. Every time there's a fight she's out of the cast . . . some peach, I tell you. Got the finest pair of legs in London, and doesn't she show them!"

"What exactly do you mean by mistress?" Woodley was anxious for information. "Do you mean they live together?"

"Well, not as a regular thing. A man like that's got to keep in training. Can't be done. But now and then . . . you know . . . week-ends. I expect she takes some others, between whiles. Wish I could afford it!"

"How . . . how much does it cost? A hundred pounds? Hundred a night? Something like that?"

"Good Lord, you don't do it that way! She's not a street tart. No . . . diamonds, motor-cars, that sort of thing. Damned expensive game, but worth it, I'll bet. I've seen her having supper at the Savoy after the theatre. Oh, boy!" He made an appreciative noise.

Woodley suddenly found himself wanting to tell Vining

about the "Siren," wanting to boast of his excursion into night-life. He despised himself for the desire, but found that he couldn't resist it. He asked him if he had heard of the place. He hadn't.

"No. Where is it? Tottenham Court Road? What do you know about it?"

"I went there in the holidays, that's all."

"Little Woodley going to night-clubs! I don't believe you."

"Why not? Why should you have the monopoly?"

"I thought you were too high-souled for that sort of thing. You're coming on. What's it like?"

"Rather fun."

Woodley spoke in spite of himself, yet with one eye on the door, lest Ainger should come in. Would Vining tell Ainger?

"Uh-huh? Anything doing? Any sport going? You must take me some time."

He felt that he had gone up in Vining's estimation, and his vanity was flattered.

The magazine containing his poem, shorn of a stanza to meet the requirements of space, duly appeared. The school for the most part passed the poem over; they were used to seeing verses in corners, and to treating them as one treats the shavings in a box of chocolates, necessary make-weights. Woodley was known to be a bit of a poet; that was accepted as an idiosyncrasy, and nobody minded much. The Prefects' Room read it, and Vining made great play with a line that ran: "Dark-eyed maidens, supple-limbed," asking Woodley where he had come across them, and if he couldn't manage an introduction. For the rest, nobody mentioned it except Campbell and Simmons.

Campbell contented himself with a friendly: "Not bad, Woodley. It's a bit exotic. Try and calm down more when you write."

And Simmons, unable to resist temptation, delivered himself of a short homily on unhealthiness and waste of time, that sent Woodley, fuming, to the Prefects' Room.

"Hullo? What's up?" asked Ainger, seeing his face.

"Oh, nothing. Simmy again. That's all."

"What's the trouble now?"

"I don't know. Trying to be funny as usual. That man doesn't like me."

"What? Not like little Woodley? Our baby prefect? Oh, Woodley, you're mistaken, he loves you! How can you doubt it?" said Vining.

"Oh, chuck it!" Woodley kicked Vining's chair.

"What's Simmy been saying now?" Ainger asked.

"Oh, disapproving of me generally. My writing again. That poem in the Mag. Unhealthy. Why do I waste my time scribbling, when I ought to be garnering the precious hours of youth to cultivate my mind? Some bilge like that."

"Well," said Vining, "I don't know why he wants to kick up such a fuss about waste of time over a poem that couldn't have taken you more than a quarter of an hour to write."

Woodley grinned.

"Do you really think it only took a quarter of an hour?"

"Well, you'd have been a fool if you'd spent any more time on it."

Woodley laughed, and the subject dropped.

Laura he did not see, save only once in the distance. Soon after term began she caught a slight chill and remained in the house. He looked for her when he went out in the town or along the Mallow Road; hovered near the private entrance to the house in the hope that she might come out as he was passing, or see him from the windows; but the windows of the drawing-room, where she was most likely to be, looked on to her garden, Simmy's study and the dining-room facing the front. He began to be more

and more afraid that he had angered her, that she had resented his letter as impertinent. If he could see her he would try to explain and apologise, but there was no opportunity. After school he was kept busy at the nets; there was Prep. and Prefects' Detention and Nets and Swimming Parades, and he had little leisure. He made up his mind that the episode in the holidays was an incident only, an interlude that he must forget. School had begun again, and he was once more a Prefect and she his house-master's wife. But supposing she were angry with him? He wished he could remember exactly what he had said in his letter; his memory of it grew more and more exaggerated, as the conviction that he had offended her grew in his mind.

And then, in the third week of term, came the Riley row. The first intimation that the school had of it was an Assembly, called suddenly in the middle of the morning, when the Head strode dramatically on to the Rostrum, holding, for unexplained reasons, a Bible in his hand, his face looking black with anger. He took his stand in the centre of the platform, delivered like a thunderclap the one word "School!" and then paused, a long time, for effect. The school shivered and sat up; something was wrong, very wrong. There was going to be the hell of a row; the word "School" hurled monosyllabically at them, frightened them at the outset. Everyone searched his memory for misdeeds which could be the cause of this cataclysm. One or two of the fags were all but overcome with a desire to stand up and confess on the spot. For one wild, unreasoning moment of panic, Woodley thought of his letters to Laura. If she had told Simmy, or he had found them . . .

The Head began to speak again. He started slowly; he spoke of cleanness and decency and purity; of natural instincts and animal appetites and the lusts of the flesh; of self-control and healthy minds and healthy bodies; of beastliness and foulness and pruriency. He used the words filthy

and abominable, and right-thinking and clean-living. He talked for twenty minutes; or perhaps talked is hardly the right word. He fulminated. It was like a denunciation of the Cities of the Plain; a magnificent performance, which would have done credit to the late Sir Henry Irving. By the time he had reached his climax the whole school was thoroughly and completely scared. They did not know what it was all about, but they were terror-stricken. He was never explicit, never came down to facts, never revealed what was the cause of all this tempest of wrath; but at the end, after a massive insistence of the necessity for purity, purity in "thought, word and deed," then, and then only, did he reveal a name—Riley. The school turned as one boy, to look for the offender, but the Head's voice continued.

"You need not turn to look for him. He is not here. He will not be here again. Not again will he be here to soil this Assembly. . . ."

Expelled! Riley expelled! What had he done? The Assembly was dismissed, broke up in a black horror of surmise, a wild babel of voices in the lockers and the washrooms.

"What the hell was it all about?" Woodley asked Ainger.

"God knows," was Ainger's reply. "But you can guess."

Actually, the facts were very simple. Riley was a blotchy, undersized boy in Ratcliffe's; a member of the Upper Fifth; an unhealthy specimen of seventeen, with yellow teeth and offensive breath. His conversation was as filthy as his nails, and he was generally and cordially detested by everyone, save a knot of three almost equally unpleasant cronies with whom he went about.

There had been some trouble, a couple of years before, over his having enlightened a group of smaller boys as to the origin of their existence; one of the boys so enlightened, being sceptical and a little scared, had gone to the Matron for verification; and the Matron had gone to the Head—

but not for verification. The present row was caused by an unexpected visit of Plunkett to the pantry in his House. The door, opening suddenly, revealed Riley and one of the housemaids hastily disentangling themselves from a rather more than compromising position. Having dispatched Riley to the sick-room and the housemaid to the Matron, Plunkett went straight to the Head. Ratcliffe, summoned to conference, was bitterly indignant. Riley was in his House, a disgrace to it, but none the less a member of it; and the fact that the venue of the crime was Plunkett's did not, in his eyes, excuse Plunkett from coming to him first. He resented Plunkett's direct appeal to the Head, not merely as a breach of etiquette, but as a personal affront, a deliberate act of spite. He found himself almost defending Riley. He went to Simmons and Blakeney, and enlisted them on his side in censuring Plunkett's action. Of the penalty for the offence there was no doubt; Riley's expulsion was inevitable. But the technique of the matter caused a decided split in the Common Room. Once again there was a shuffling of cards, a re-grouping of allies; enemies in old feuds found themselves on the same side in this. Simmons and Plunkett, cordially united in the affair of bounds last term, were now frigid adversaries. In a few weeks something else would arise and involve a further readjustment, but, while this lasted, feeling ran high.

The Head called a Masters' Meeting on the eve of the Assembly. They gathered in the Senior Common Room, a dark, panelled library, with faded bound volumes of the *Illustrated London News* ranged to the ceiling, and piled copies of the *Times Literary* and *Educational Supplements* collecting dust on the lower shelves. Thirty of them, from the Art Master and the Physics Demonstrator upwards, arranged themselves round a massive table, lit pipes and cigarettes, and listened gloomily to the Head's words. He talked to them, not as he spoke to the boys, an outraged

Jehovah, but as a bitter, weary task-master, reproaching them with remissness. The tone of the School was sagging, he said. That might perhaps be regarded as his fault, but, personally, he was unable to see how he was to be expected to maintain it without co-operation, and especially without co-operation from the house-masters.

A house-master, and a house-master alone, was able to keep in personal touch with the boys; he should have his finger always on the pulse of his House. Without the house-masters he could do nothing. They were the guardians of the school morale. If they looked after their houses individually as houses, he could look after them collectively, as a school. Without that . . . he shrugged his shoulders. If the workmen are idle and incompetent, the contractor cannot be expected to fulfil his job. The house-masters resented being compared with workmen, and disliked the words idle and incompetent, all the more so as they were uttered in the presence of the Junior Staff. Simmons was acutely aware of Campbell, amusedly tamping down his pipe. In due course the Head came round to the younger masters and their share of the responsibility, but in the main he blamed the house-masters and suggested that they look to it. They, in their turn, went away and called meetings of their house-prefects, where they paraphrased the Head's remarks, transferring the blame to the Prefectorate.

Simmons gathered his four prefects into his study. He put them on hard, straight chairs, and, taking the revolving desk-chair for himself, talked for an hour. The prefects, he said, were responsible for the moral tone of the House; they were, by the nature of things, nearer the boys than he could ever be; it was their duty, their bounden duty as prefects, to keep their fingers on the pulse of the House. Without their co-operation, how could he be expected . . . and so forth. He salted his remarks with a lit-

tle sarcasm, a few references to the psychological insight, the moral probity and force of character, for which they had been selected to adorn the office of prefect, but, in the main, the tenor of his discourse was the same as that of the Head. He addressed himself particularly to Ainger, as House Captain, but he managed a few personal attentions to each of them in turn. They sat round and listened, Ainger stolid and impersonal, Vining bored and contemptuous, Milner trying to ape Vining's attitude, and Woodley, a little flushed and uncomfortable, yet wondering exactly what it was all about. Dismissed, they sauntered back to the Prefects' Room, Woodley leaving them on the way to get an essay back from Campbell.

Cope was clearing away, in a more than usual state of agitation, because it was five minutes to five, and at five o'clock he was due in Task Book. Ratcliffe had put him in because he hadn't prepared his Livy, and, after much inventive guessing, had construed "limen" as lime-tree, and Ratcliffe had said: "Are you sure you don't mean lime-juice, Cope?" and he had laughed with that servile appreciation with which boys always laugh at their masters' bad jokes, in the hope that the resulting gratification may lead to further jokes and postponement of work or punishment. But Ratcliffe had only waited until he had finished laughing, and then said:

"I'm glad you find it so funny, Cope. Suppose you write it out a hundred times—'Limen' does not mean lime-juice or lime-tree—and come to T.B. to-night."

He was in T.B. regularly, at least twice a week, and he was used to it; usually, too, he managed to clear away the tea-things and wash them up between half-past four and five, but this afternoon Plunkett had caught him, and detained him for a full twenty minutes with a long talk on the subject of handwriting and blots, with the result that

It was now five minutes to five and the tea-things were not yet cleared.

"Well, my son, not done yet?" said Vining cheerily.

"Please, Vining, may I leave the washing-up till later?"

"No. You may not. Why the hell should you?"

"You see, Vining, it's nearly five, and Ratty's got me in T.B. . . ."

"Who's got you in?"

"Ratty, and . . ."

"Mr. Ratcliffe to you, Cope. Don't be disrespectful to your schoolmasters. Well, why didn't you come in earlier?"

"I couldn't, Vining. Plunk . . . Mr. Plunkett kept me, and . . ."

"My son, if you will be a beastly little slacker and get yourself put into Task Book, it's no fault of ours."

Cope began to snivel.

"Oh, leave the washing-up," said Ainger. "Shove the things into the cupboard, out of the way, and cut along."

"Thank you, Ainger."

Cope began clattering plates on to the tray, and then Vining spoke again.

"I hope you were duly impressed with the Head's awful words in Assembly this morning, Cope? I trust that you will profit by them, and always keep yourself pure in thought, word and deed."

Cope turned.

"I didn't understand what he was talking about, Vining."

"That's as it should be, Cope. I'm glad to see you're still unspotted from the world."

"What was it? What has Riley done?"

"Little boys mustn't ask questions."

"It's something you'll understand when you're older," said Milner with a laugh.

"And perhaps, if you're a very good boy, I'll tell you one day," Vining added.

"West said he knew," Cope persisted, "but he wouldn't tell me. He told me to ask Simmy."

There was a yell of laughter from the three.

"That's right, Cope. You ask Simmy," Vining urged. "Or Mrs. Simmy. Why don't you ask her? She's a nice woman. I'm sure she'd tell you."

"Shut up, Vining!" said Ainger. "And look here, Cope, I thought you were in a hurry. You cut to T.B. Imshi."

"And remember, Cope," Vining called, by way of postscript, as he reached the door, "pure in thought, word and deed."

"I wish you'd leave that kid alone, Vining," said Ainger after the door had closed; "he's still in the gooseberry-bush stage."

"Time he came out of it then. Lord, I hope he asks Simmy. Imagine his face!"

"It would be a rag." Milner became thoughtful, and then laughed. "I remember when I was a kid asking a master at my Prep. school how I was born. They used to teach us Physiology, and at the end of one term he told us we could ask him any questions we liked. So I asked that. A lot of older chaps egged me on to it. I didn't know what I was doing. I was only about ten at the time, and frightfully green."

"What did the old boy do?"

"Oh, turned puce. Stammered and gurgled, and referred me to my mater."

"And she?"

"Trotted out the usual natural history poppycock—birds, beasts and fishes. I was none the wiser. Wonder what Simmy would tell Cope? He'd probably say it was all a matter of *esprit de corps*." Milner innocently quoted Simmons's favourite phrase.

"Well, so it is, in a way," Vining chuckled. "What a damn-fool game that pi-jaw was, he gave us this after-

noon. We, as prefects, responsible for the moral tone of the House! Well, Ainger, you're house-captain, will you organise the force for the protection of Public Morals? Going to make me your A.D.C.?" He saluted smartly, with a click of the heel.

Ainger looked up from the motor paper he was reading.

"If you were to take your position as prefect a bit more seriously, Vining, it wouldn't do you any harm."

"Oh, Lord, hark at him getting all official! I should think you'd better enlist Woodley. He ought to fit Simmy's ideal of the pale, pink, pure young schoolboy, with his Infant Samuel face. That kid's too damned innocent to live."

"I don't know so much," said Milner. "Look at his lurid poetry. That thing in the Mag. struck me as pretty go-ahead for a pure public school. 'Dark-eyed maidens, supple-limbed!' Supple-limbed, not half!" He clicked his tongue appreciatively. "I don't see how you make him out to be innocent, Vining. I believe he's a dark horse myself."

"Hell! That doesn't mean anything. He was probably thinking of an athletic aunt on the tennis-court. What do you say, Ainger?"

"Woodley? I don't know that he's particularly innocent. I think he's just . . . reticent, that's all."

"Reticent, my foot!"

"Well, shy then."

Woodley came in soon after this. He had found Campbell alone, and after taking his essay had ventured to say, with a shy grin:

"We've been having a moral talk from our housemaster."

"Oh?" Campbell smiled back. "What did he have to say?"

"Nothing. Oh, he talked for an hour, but nothing I could get hold of, except that the School seems to be doing a Gadarene Swine stunt down the slope of perdition." Camp-

bell laughed involuntarily. "What's it all about?" he went on. "I couldn't make head or tail of the Head's thunder."

"Well, it's a pretty nasty sort of business." Campbell gave him a brief outline. "You needn't pass it around. But that's what the trouble is. I think it's a pity to make all this mystery of it, but it isn't too healthy."

"No. Riley's no loss, though."

In the Prefects' Room they were still talking of Simmy's address.

"Interference, all along the line," Vining was saying, as he came in. "Now we shan't get a moment's peace till the end of term, what with this purity campaign of his. You're going to be given the Order of the First Angel, Woodley, and sent round with a confession album to the fags."

"Oh, Simmy's purity campaign makes me sick. Not that I hold any brief for Riley, whatever he may have done, dirty little beast that he is!"

"Whatever he may have done?" Vining pounced on the vagueness of the phrase.

"Well, the Head wasn't exactly explicit, was he, with all his biblical metaphors?" Woodley withheld his private information from Campbell.

"I've been talking to Barnes—Riley's pal. It appears it was one of the housemaids in Plunkett's. The tall, dark one. Doesn't say much for Riley's taste. Still, beggars can't be choosers. I always thought she looked a lascivious piece. Plunkett caught them in the pantry, *flagrante delicto,* so to speak."

"How nice for Plunkett!" said Woodley shortly.

"Damn rot it is," Vining went on, "sacking a man for that."

"I don't see it."

"Hell, yes! It's human nature, isn't it? I was over in France last summer; met a lot of French fellows. Things are pretty different over there, I can tell you. Why, almost

every boy has his *petite amie,* and the thing's recognised and generally known. If you try and stop it, it only leads to the other thing."

"I don't believe it," said Woodley hotly.

"Why not? It's the same thing in girls' schools, if there are any men about the place. I could tell you a few tales that would make you open your eyes. I wouldn't mind being Boots in a girls' school for a bit. And as for those co-education places, my hat!" He turned up his thumbs joyously.

"Bilge!" said Ainger curtly.

"What do you suppose they choose the school skivvies so old and ugly for, then? Gor, look at them! They must have picked them out on purpose. You wouldn't find a lot like that in a day's march. What do they think we are? Celibate monks? You can't get away from human nature. That's all Simmy's purity campaign means—suppress your natural instincts. It's all right for him. He's married. He can do what he likes. And I bet he makes the most of it, too. That's the secret of the popularity of marriage, you know. Well, I hope she likes it. That's all."

"Oh, shut up!" Woodley jumped up angrily. The thought of Laura being discussed revolted him now as it never had before.

"I'm all with Simmy on this stunt of his," said Ainger, "though I don't like the way he goes about it, and I'm not going to suck up to him over it. But there's a damn sight too much of all that sort of talk in the school, and I'm going to drop on it all I can."

"Of course, if you're going 'pi.' in your old age . . ."

"Don't be a bloody fool! It's not a question of being 'pi.' . . ."

"Well, it's a bit of a sudden conversion, isn't it? I can remember a few yarns you've told. . . ." This was true, and it went home to Ainger.

"Yes, well, that's another thing," he said.

"Oh, drop it, Vining," Woodley threw in. "Ainger's quite right. You've got a filthy mind."

"Oh, very well! Only you can leave me out of your prayer meetings, if you don't mind." He walked over to the window, singing "Blessed are the pure in heart," to a hymn tune, and then stopped. "Here, Milner, who's that kid peeping in?"

Milner threw up the window and yelled at a vanishing figure.

"Here, you! Come here! Come back! What d'you mean by it? 'Strewth, it's Cope!"

"Cope, is it? Tell him to come in here."

"Cope," said Milner, talking out of the window, "we want you. Your presence is urgently desired." He turned back to the others. "Scrimshanking, the little tic. That's all you get for your leniency, Ainger."

"What's up?" Woodley asked.

"Ainger let him off washing-up, because he said he was in T.B."

There came a knock at the door.

"Ontray, Mossoo," Vining called and, as the door opened, began a menacing gesture with his arm that caused Cope to duck, and then transformed it into an unconcerned smoothing of his hair.

"Well, young man," said Ainger, "what have you got to say for yourself? Why aren't you in T.B.?"

"Please, Ainger, Ratty—I mean Mr. Ratcliffe—forgot to put my name down. It wasn't on the list when I got there."

"He never put you in at all," said Milner.

"Yes, Milner, he did, honestly. He said he was going to, second hour this morning. You ask anyone in D. Latin. Honour bright, Milner, he forgot."

"Too much on his mind with all these House purity

stunts, I expect," said Vining. "Lucky for you, young man." He ruffled Cope's hair.

"Then why didn't you come back here and finish your washing-up, you lazy little swab?" Milner aimed a kick at his behind that precipitated him into Vining's arms, which promptly encircled him.

"And what do you mean by looking in at this window, eh?" Holding him tightly with one arm, Vining began to pull his ears. "Don't you know it's forbidden, eh? Wanted to hear what we were saying, I suppose? Thought we were talking about you, perhaps?"

"No, Vining! . . . Oooh!"

Woodley looked up. He began to feel he ought to do something about this, intervene on Cope's behalf. It would not have occurred to him before, but since Laura's remarks about bullying he could not very well let this pass unchallenged. He hated to interfere, doubting his power to achieve anything; he lacked conviction, but he owed it to his self-respect at least to make some protest.

"Oh, stop bullying the kid, Vining," he said, with as much sincerity as he could summon into his voice. Everyone turned to him in surprise, Cope not the least.

"Bullying? Bullying?" Vining stared. "What *are* you talking about?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about." Woodley was very uncomfortable.

"Indeed I don't! Cope, your kind-hearted uncle Woodley thinks we're bullying you. Are we? Tell him. Tell the nice kind gentleman from the Society for Cruelty to Children whether you're being bullied. Are you? Is this bullying? Is it? Eh? Eh?" A jerk of the arms brought up each interjection.

"N . . . no, Vining."

"There, sir, you see. He says it isn't bullying, and he

ought to know. Oughtn't you? Of course you ought! You see, he loves his kind prefects, sir. Don't you? Don't you?"

"Yes, Vining."

"Of course he does. And have they ever bullied him; ever, ever, ever? Have they? Have they?"

"Shut up, Vining! Leave him alone," Woodley said angrily.

"Have they?" Vining took no notice. "Of course they haven't. That's a good boy; always tell the truth and no harm can possibly come to you. Now, give your Uncle Vining a nice big kiss, just to show the kind gentleman how much you love him."

Cope stood staring doggedly at the floor, not knowing what he was expected to do. He was surging with a black anger against Woodley, certain that he had started this protest only as a new means of baiting him. There was a silence.

"Well, Cope, I'm waiting. Aren't you going to kiss me? Don't you want to? Oh, what a naughty, bad, ungrateful little boy not to want to kiss his good, kind uncle! No nice puffer-train for you this Christmas!" He took Cope's face in his hands, and began pummelling it. Ainger interrupted.

"Oh, leave him alone, Vining, and let him get on with the washing-up!"

"You hear, my son? Grandpa speaks. Get on with the washing-up. And, as you must have made all arrangements for detention this afternoon, it seems a pity to disappoint you. So you'd better come to P.D. at 5.30. See?"

"But why, Vining?"

"Why? Ah, let me see. Why? There must always be a reason for everything, mustn't there? Well, shall we say for not being in T.B.; for looking in at the window; for not kissing me when I told you to; for arguing with me now; and for being a lazy, inky young slacker? Are those sufficient reasons for you, or would you like me to invent

more? And now get on with the tea-things till half-past, and if you break anything I'll slay you."

The prefects settled down to silence as Cope, released, began his duties; a silence broken only by his expressed resentment of the injustice of his lot. Milner threw a look at him, said briefly, "Oh, for God's sake don't snivel," and returned to P. G. Wodehouse.

Woodley sat in hot discomfort, angry and ashamed for his clumsiness in tactics, and his cowardice in not pursuing them; but he had chosen an inopportune method of opening his campaign, and felt that he had better let it drop for the moment. He told himself as an excuse that he had no desire either to pose as a saviour, or to row with Vining in front of Cope, but he had an uncomfortable conviction that it was lack of courage that really accounted for his retreat. He felt thankful that Ainger's interruption had, for the moment, saved the situation; later, he might be able to talk to Ainger and enlist his help; it was not an undertaking that he felt capable of inaugurating alone. His first shot had missed fire badly. He looked up at Cope, busied at the cupboard.

"There's a box of peppermint creams on the second shelf. Pass it across," he said, and then, after a moment, *"Second* shelf, I said, you idiot!"

Cope brought him the box, looking at its contents longingly.

"Chuck me one, Woodley." Woodley threw a sweet at Milner, which he missed.

"Butter-fingers," said Ainger good-humouredly. "Think you'll get your cricket-tassel, if you can't catch better than that? Pass me one."

"Vining?" Woodley stretched out his arm, holding the box exactly under Cope's nose.

"Peppermints?" Vining was scornful. "Lord, no! Beer-fume removers, that's all they're good for."

"Don't swank!"

"And what are *you* waiting for?" Vining suddenly turned on Cope. Cope jumped.

"Nothing, Vining."

Woodley's conscience pricked him again.

"Want a sweet, Cope?" Cope looked at him dubiously, suspecting a catch. "Go on. I mean it. Take one."

Cope helped himself gingerly, flinching from an expected cuff, and, when it did not come, made off with the tea-things, wondering what on earth had happened to Woodley, and imagining that he must be trying to make amends for his earlier ragging.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Woodley, getting maudlin over Cope like that? He pinches enough sweets as it is, without your giving him any."

"Yes, well, perhaps if we gave them him he wouldn't pinch them." Woodley felt it was improbable as he said it; all very well in theory, but somehow all very wrong in practice. He wished he could explain that to Laura.

"What a hope!"

"Yes, but all the same," having taken the first plunge he felt himself committed to his protest, "I do think you give the kid a pretty thin time. I don't mean you only, Vining; I mean all of us. It's poor fun fagging anyway, and there's no need for us to bully him on top of it."

"Bully? Bully?? What on earth do you mean? Have you been reading school-stories in the holidays? *Eric, or Little by Little?* 'Young Woodley's sensitive nature was always revolted by cruelty.'"

"Don't be a bloody fool! No, I mean it. You do knock the kid about."

"Well, you've got a nerve, I must say! Knock the kid about! What do you want me to do? Wet-nurse him? Are you going to start a crèche for the fags? Let's change the

school motto to 'Purity and Kindliness,' with Simmy and you as moving spirits. What the hell's the idea?"

"If you're going to take it like that. . . . But it's true, isn't it? We do give the kid a rotten time. I know I was pretty miserable when I was a fag. . . ."

"Oh, all right. We'll all be very kind to our poor little Cope, kiss him when he smashes the china, tell him it doesn't matter and pay for the breakages ourselves . . . tell him bed-time stories when we tuck him in at night. You can start by reading him your poems."

Woodley gave it up in despair. There seemed no use in arguing, pushing against Vining's wall of sarcasm. He got out a history, and settled down to George the Third. After a moment Ainger spoke.

"By the way," he said, "we're all bidden to tea with Simmy and his missis on Sunday. Simmy told me yesterday. I forgot to pass it on."

"Oh, hell!" said Vining. "I hate those bun-worries. Sitting round the drawing-room doing balancing stunts, with Simmy being sarcastic about nothing, and airing his Oxford memories, and the Lady Laura all silent and seductive behind the tea-tray."

"Do you know, I'm sorry for that woman," said Ainger. "I believe she hates those tea-parties as much as we do."

Woodley looked up suddenly. How had Ainger guessed?

"Now, a *tête-à-tête* wouldn't be such a bad idea. But I'm no good at parlour tricks," Vining went on. "Besides, it messes one's afternoon up so."

"I don't see that. What the hell is there to do on a Sunday afternoon, anyway?"

"I don't know, Woodley, whether your adventures with the houris of London night-life have blinded you to the blandishments of the young woman in Crawley's, but . . ."

"Which one?"

"Do you mean the red-haired one who always tries to fumble with your hand when she's giving you your change?" Ainger asked.

"What?" said Woodley, startled. "Does she do that to you, too?"

Vining let off a yell of laughter.

"Oh, my precious, did you think you were the only one?"

As a matter of fact, it had not occurred to Woodley that he was not. He abandoned his history and went over to the settle on the pretext of finding *The Sphere,* in order to hide his blushing.

"Well, what about her, anyway?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Only she's not averse from taking long walks on Sunday afternoons in the neighbourhood of Mallow Woods."

"But Mallow Woods are out of bounds."

"Exactly, my innocent. What did I tell you when they were put out? Less likelihood of being . . . disturbed."

Something in the way in which he paused, selectively, before the last word, choosing it succulently, suggestively, caught Woodley with the same mingled sense of attraction and fear that he had experienced at the night-club. He felt the same change of rhythm in his heart-beat, the same constriction of his throat. The atmosphere of the room seemed to grow suddenly hot and heavy. He looked up, almost furtively at Vining.

"What . . . what do you mean?" he stammered.

"Oh, come now . . . you don't want me to be coarse, do you?"

Their eyes met. There was a laugh in Vining's, a sensual droop of the lids and a mocking twist to his red, moist lips that intensified Woodley's feeling of intrigued, guilty curiosity. He remembered, years before, looking up a sexual word in the dictionary with the same sensation.

"You mean you . . . you . . . ?" He could not finish his question, but his eyes would not leave searching Vining's face.

"Exactly!"

Turning suddenly away, he found Ainger looking intently at him, and blushed again as though caught in a dirty act. He stood staring at the floor.

"And she's got a friend," Vining went on. "Works in Cowell's, the draper's. Nice girl . . . dark-eyed, supple-limbed," his voice rose lyrically. "I'll introduce you, if you like."

"I don't think so, thanks." Woodley turned away.

"If I took you seriously, Vining . . ." Ainger began.

"You'd report me to Simmy as victim No. 1 of the Purity Campaign. Well, go ahead then. Here, I must go. I've got a hell of a lot of extra Maths. to get up." He went to the door, and then turned back. "Think it over, Woodley. Any Sunday afternoon when the grass isn't damp." He went out with a laugh.

"Old Vining knows a thing or two." Milner rose, stretching himself.

"And do you admire him for that?" Ainger spoke angrily.

"Admire? Well . . ."

"You do, of course. Lord knows why. As if you didn't know it was nine-tenths bluff and swank."

"I don't know so much. He's pretty hot stuff. His pater's rich, you know. Vining's tinned meats . . . lets him do as he likes, gives him a latch-key and no questions asked. Wish mine did."

"He's got more sense."

"Well, I'm going to change for nets. Coming?"

"No. I'm taking P.D."

"Woodley?"

Woodley shook his head. "George Three," he said, tapping his book. Milner nodded and went out.

The room was very still for a moment. Woodley sat, looking in front of him, brooding; Vining's insinuations had inflamed his imagination. Ainger turned in his chair and watched him narrowly, seeing the dark shadow in his eyes, yet afraid to speak. At last Woodley shook himself.

"I hate Vining," he said explosively.

Ainger smiled.

"I know you do."

"Don't you?"

"Hate? No. He's a type."

"A foul type. I say, Ainger, how much is there in it?"

"In what?"

"All his . . . talk."

"More than I pretend to believe, I think."

"These shop girls . . . does he . . . really?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Why don't you do something?"

"How can I? Split to Simmy? You know I can't. Before he got made a Pre., it was different, but he was damn careful then. The best I can do now is to pretend not to believe it."

"But you do, all the same?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"You don't approve of it?"

"No, I damn well don't! All the same, there is something in what he says."

"How do you mean?"

"Well . . . we're under a system here that treats us as not being mature until we leave . . . that is when we're eighteen or nineteen. Nature matured us at fourteen. What about it?"

"But you don't mean . . . that everyone . . . ?"

"Not everyone, no. It works different ways. But precious few of us escape it altogether, one way or another. After all, we have got bodies."

"I know, but . . . like that, it seems . . . beastly. And the worst of it is . . . I don't know whether there's anything the matter with me, but . . . I can't help being . . . well . . ."

"Attracted?"

"No . . . not that. Interested. Oh, I don't know . . . yes, attracted, perhaps, in a rotten sort of way."

"I know. Curious, anyway."

"Yes. I hate myself for it. I find myself thinking about it. It's all wrong. This business of Riley. I hate the little swine, I always have—and yet it's, well . . . attractive's not the word, but it makes you think about it, imagine things, picture yourself doing things you know you never could really do . . . that you don't want to do either . . . And yet you can't help it. You know how one used to read the smutty bits in Shakespeare and the Bible. . . ."

"Of course I know."

"You remember my telling you about that night-club in the holidays? Well, it was like that. I hated it, I was . . . frightened; I wanted to run away and yet I couldn't help thinking about it. All the next night I couldn't sleep because of it . . . you know, wanting it and yet . . . And Vining's talk makes me feel like that, too. It's beastly. Why is it?"

"Sex. That sounds silly, but . . . as I say, Nature intended us to marry young. Well, we can't, nowadays, but that doesn't prevent our feeling things. You can't ignore your body. And the fact that one's decent, more or less . . . won't let you take the easy way out. That's the hell of it. You want it, and you don't want it. But there's no point in being ashamed of yourself for it. It's natural."

"I suppose it is. But then this Purity business of Simmy's

is all wrong, as Vining says . . . it's suppressing your natural instincts. But is it? Isn't there something in what he says?"

"Of course there is. A lot . . . as an ideal, anyway. Put up a fight, don't give in to things. It's not too damn practical though."

"No. Nothing is, I've found. Things that are all right in theory never work out in practice. Like geometry." He laughed. "I can learn the props., but I never can do a rider. I can't apply the theory. Well, life seems to me to be just like that. This business of bullying, now. I was right, wasn't I, in what I said about Cope?"

"What made you?"

"I don't know. We do treat him pretty rottenly, though. All the fags get bullied more or less, and it's wrong, isn't it? And then the way Vining puts it when I try and say anything makes it seem bloody silly. Well, which is right? Oh, you're decent to the fags, I know, and I try to be, too. But it's different for you. You're House Captain and you can do something, but I'm the junior here, and . . . why didn't you back me up just now?"

"I didn't know what you were after. I thought you were ragging at first."

"Well, I wasn't."

"What's it all about? I mean, what started you on it? Just . . . an idea, all of a sudden?"

"No. As a matter of fact it was Mrs. Simmy."

"Mrs. Simmy?"

"Yes. I met her in town in the holidays. She talked about bullying then, and it seemed to me she was right in what she said, so I thought I ought to do something. And then, to-day, when I tried, look at the fool I made of myself. Theory and practice again! Hell of a good reformer I make!"

"What does Mrs. Simmy know about it, anyway?"

"Oh, quite a lot. At least she seemed to."

"I didn't know you'd seen her in the hols. You never told me."

"Didn't I?" Woodley looked away self-consciously, and then rose, anxious to change the subject. "Oh, well, it doesn't matter, anyway. I'm going up to the study to work."

Conscious that Ainger was watching him curiously, he picked up his book and stood fidgeting with it, flipping the leaves, finding it difficult to leave the room. There came a knock on the door. He started.

"Who's that?" he shouted, letting off his awkwardness in irritation. There was no answer. Ainger was still watching him. The knock was repeated.

"Come in!" he yelled, and then, when there was still no reply, he strode over to the door, threw it open violently, angrily repeating "I said, 'Come in!' " as he did so, and then stopped suddenly. Laura was standing in the passage outside.

VIII

LAURA had been to a wives' tea-party, one of the incidents of her life at Mallowhurst that she most disliked. This afternoon Mrs. Ratcliffe had been the hostess, and Mrs. Plunkett had been deliberately excluded owing to the reigning Plunkett-Ratcliffe feud. Indeed, the party had been arranged in haste by Mrs. Ratcliffe for the express purpose of discussing the situation, and Laura invited as the wife of Ratcliffe's principal ally. There were two other ladies present. Mrs. Ratcliffe had been amazed, but not altogether displeased, to find that Laura knew nothing of the affair. Simmons had not mentioned it to her, and she arrived in complete ignorance of the reason for the gathering. The other ladies were sitting conspiratorially round Mrs. Ratcliffe's would-be Louis Quinze drawing-room, and stared at her incredulously when she asked what it was that they were discussing.

"The boy Riley, Mrs. Simmons, and Mr. Plunkett's action. Surely you know?"

"I'm afraid I don't. Who is the boy Riley, and what has he done, and what action of Mr. Plunkett are you talking of?"

"My dear Mrs. Simmons . . ." Mrs. Ratcliffe suspended the tea-pot in mid-pour, and opened her eyes wide. "Do you mean you don't know? Oh, my dear!"

She put down the pot, hitched up her chair and proceeded to describe Riley's offence, with a wealth of circumstantial detail and pregnant evasion, as one married woman to another, now and then dropping her voice to a penetrating whisper, lingering over its unpleasantness as the lower classes are said to relish the recital of a particularly

brutal murder, forgetting in the enjoyment of her narration the slight to her husband in Mr. Plunkett's action. She had not anticipated an opportunity of telling this part of the story; she had imagined that everyone knew it already, and she took full advantage of Laura's ignorance.

"And their clothes, my dear! There was absolutely no doubt, no doubt whatever. Her skirt . . . and he . . . his trousers . . . well, I mean . . . one doesn't like to go into details of these things, but, well, the condition of his clothes . . . and I mean the door wasn't even locked, so that there was no time for them to do anything, anything at all. He was sitting on the sink, right on the edge, with the girl on his lap, and you could see, the moment the door opened . . . they jumped up, of course, but it was perfectly obvious . . . there wasn't time to arrange a thing."

Laura was revolted.

"Yes, I see," she said. "But how do you know? You didn't see them yourself?"

"No. Of course not. But Mr. Plunkett told Mr. Ratcliffe. He had to, naturally, Riley being in our House." Mrs. Ratcliffe always referred to her husband's House as "ours." "And he told me."

"Why?" Laura did her best to keep disgust out of her voice.

"Why? Why? My dear Mrs. Simmons, some of us happen to take an interest in the affairs of the school, and especially those concerning our own Houses."

"Of course."

"If Mr. Simmons did not tell you, I have no doubt it was because you . . . well, you don't seem to share our interest in school matters. That, of course, is a personal thing, though I, myself, think that a wife should . . . well, share as far as possible . . . in her husband's work, take an interest in it at least."

"I can hardly imagine my husband giving me details

about disarranged clothing, however much interest I might take in his work."

"Really, Mrs. Simmons, I see no need for coarseness."

"Coarseness?" Laura gasped in amazement.

"But one has to face things. It's no good shirking, pretending. There are unpleasant features in every school, things one has to realise if one has charge of boys at the developing age. Perhaps you don't know . . ."

Laura felt sick. It was a relief when the conversation turned into the less inky channels of procedure, of Mr. Plunkett's disgraceful and unconstitutional behaviour in going to the Head direct, though even there she found herself on the wrong side.

"I can't see how it matters so much," said Laura; "if the boy is as definitely guilty as you admit, he has to be expelled, I suppose. But does it really matter how it's gone about?"

"It seems to me to matter a very great deal. The whole question of principle and etiquette is at stake. Mr. Plunkett's behaviour was unpardonable. As a mere matter of courtesy he should have come to Mr. Ratcliffe first, but it's far more than that. The whole basis of the House system is the authority of the house-master, and Mr. Plunkett's action was not only the worst possible breach of professional etiquette, but of that confidence and interdependence that must exist if there is to be any cohesion in the school at all."

She ended triumphantly with the last sentence, as a quotation from the letter of protest that Simmons and Ratcliffe had jointly composed and sent by post to Plunkett the previous evening.

"I see. Of course I don't know anything about these things, but it does strike me as making rather a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"If you ask your husband, Mrs. Simmons, I think you

will find that he shares Mr. Ratcliffe's opinion of Mr. Plunkett's action. They are arranging a formal protest. Mr. Simmons has called a Masters' Meeting to ask for a vote of censure."

"Oh? And what good will that do?"

"Good? Mr. Plunkett will apologise. At least, we hope so. It's the least he can do."

"And then? Will Riley be forgiven?"

"Forgiven? But of course not. My dear Mrs. Simmons! You can't forgive a thing like that!"

"Well, isn't that the important thing? The boy's been caught and he's got to be expelled. Does it matter who caught him or who reported it? Isn't it all a little petty? Just standing on dignity? The whole incident seems to have been most unpleasant, and I should have thought everyone would have been only too glad to get it over as quickly and quietly as possible. And, anyway, wasn't that just the position last term over the Mallow Woods business? I seem to remember that my husband went to the Head then, though it was a boy in someone else's House?"

"That was very different. The boy was in Mr. Blakeney's. Mr. Simmons reported it to him in the first place, and he refused to move. In those circumstances Mr. Simmons had no alternative but to go to the Head."

"I see."

"You don't understand these things, Mrs. Simmons."

"No."

"Though really I should have thought that after two years . . . it is two years you've been here, isn't it?"

"Yes. Two years."

"Well, I should have thought that by now you would have seen enough . . ."

"I have. Quite enough." Laura rose suddenly. "I must go."

"I'm sorry you don't approve of my husband's attitude,

Mrs. Simmons, to say nothing of your own. I thought you would be with us in this, at least."

"I?" Laura laughed. "What does it matter what I approve of? I don't know anything about it. You ought to leave me out of these discussions. And, anyway, I don't disapprove. I just don't understand. That's all."

"No." Mrs. Ratcliffe took her hand, and held it coldly for a moment. "But I do think wives should stand by their husbands."

"Of course. So do I. Good-bye."

She went out quietly, and as soon as the door was shut, the ladies turned to each other and pounced eagerly into a discussion of her extraordinary behaviour, and why Mr. Simmons didn't do something about it. She walked slowly home, well aware of what they would be saying about her, her mind possessed by a cold, impotent fury, a desperate, baffled anger that turned itself almost to wonder whether it could be true that human beings could be so petty, whether the whole situation, the school and all its politics and intrigue, were not some fantastic invention or dream of which she could disentangle herself by suddenly walking through it, as one walks out of a fog, and find it something she had imagined in a state of overwrought nerves. She heard the voices of the boys practising at the nets, the click of a cricket-ball against a bat, someone shouting from one study window to another, incredulous that the life they symbolised, the whole basis of the school, could have any connection with the talk she had just left, the monstrous by-product that was her existence there.

Back in her drawing-room she was restless; she tried to read, but her mind refused to leave its sense of resentment and imprisonment, and, to occupy herself, she began to sort the letters and papers in her desk. In doing so she came across Woodley's poems which she had not yet had the opportunity to return. She glanced through them again

with a stab in her heart at the memory they evoked of their lunch at the Florence, and his flushed young face across the table, and of his letters, the *naïveté* of which had touched her with a humorous tenderness. She felt suddenly a desire to see and talk to him again. The idea leaped to her mind that she might return the poems to him now. She looked at the clock; it was a quarter past five—a time at which she knew the prefects often to be at leisure in their room, as she had seen and envied them through the window from the Lane. She rose from her desk. She could take the poems to him now. She wanted to take them to him. The realisation came suddenly, startlingly, so that she stood for a moment quite still in wonder. She wanted to see him; yet it was not so much Woodley himself as the simplicity he stood for. She felt a need for contact now with honesty and truth as a well of healing, where she might find comfort for the bleak desolation in her heart; and she saw him before her, momentarily, in a sort of radiance, clear-eyed and eager, as one visualises in thirst a spring of water.

She took the poems and went out through the garden, conscious that she was trembling a little, a sense of adventure pulsing in her. It was the first time she had ever entered the school-buildings during term. She timidly pushed open the door from the Lane, reserved for the prefects' use, and was relieved to find the corridor empty. Her steps echoed on the stone floor. She stopped outside the prefects' door and knocked. The moment she had done so she regretted her coming, suddenly afraid. The boys had changed back from friends to strangers again. She heard Woodley shout "Who's that?" and shrank back a little, unable to answer, striving at the last moment to think of some excuse for her presence, should he not be alone. She seemed to wait interminably. Was no one going to open the door? She knocked again. Her sense of adventure had deserted her; she felt only frightened and a little foolish. The door was

flung open angrily, and then Woodley fell back with a gasp of astonishment at seeing her.

"Mrs. Simmons!" he said. "I beg your pardon. I'd no idea it was you. Do forgive me for shouting like that."

"It's quite all right," she said.

"I'm most awfully sorry. Won't you come in?"

She came in. Ainger had jumped up, and was staring at her in surprise. She said "Good afternoon" to him, and stood waiting, awkwardly, looking at neither of them.

"Good afternoon," Ainger replied. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks."

She took Ainger's armchair, and sat staring at her bag and the bundle of manuscript in her lap. Why had she come? The atmosphere was strained and formal. She felt that they resented her. At last Ainger broke the silence.

"Can I do something for you?"

She looked round the room. A book on the table gave her an idea.

"Please. It's very irregular of me, coming here like this, I know," she said, and then felt self-conscious, kittenish, almost, apologising for herself, "but I wondered . . . have you a history book? I was having an argument . . . about a date. . . . I haven't a history at home. . . ." She stopped, ashamed of herself for the lie, and then added, "I happened to be walking past. I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not. Here." Woodley handed her a book. "Can I find it for you? What was the date you wanted?" She looked at him helplessly, as though he knew the whole thing to be a fabrication, and she were begging him not to be angry.

"The Armada," she said, without knowing why she chose it. "It's a silly date to have forgotten." She gave him back the book.

"1553, wasn't it?" said Ainger.

"Lord, no. Later than that." Woodley was flipping over the leaves. She sat quite still, upright in the chair, not daring to lean back at her ease, her eyes fixed on a tear in the cover of the window-seat. "Here it is. 1588."

"Thank you." She looked up at him.

"Were you right?"

"Right? About what?"

"The date . . . your argument?"

"Oh . . . no . . . no, I was wrong."

"What did you say?"

Oh, why must he go on? The lie seemed to be assuming ridiculous proportions; she felt that in a moment it must involve the rest of her life, that she would never be able to escape its consequences.

"I said 1583."

"Well, it wasn't far out."

"No." She must get away. This was intolerable. "Thank you for . . . clearing it up. It's silly how a thing like that . . ." Her voice trailed away. She could not go on. She smiled at him weakly, and then sat in a desperate, fascinated silence that she could not break. She wished she had not come. She had forgotten why she came. The impulse was lost; she was conscious only of being utterly inappropriate, sitting there, miserably ill at ease. She fidgeted with the handle of her bag, and then rose nervously.

"I must go."

The bundle of poems slid on to the floor. Woodley stooped to pick them up. She saw him recognise his own handwriting on the envelope that held them, and start slightly. He looked at her questioningly as he handed them to her.

"Thank you." She took them back, feeling more awkward than ever. "I'm afraid I've disturbed you."

"No. Not a bit, really." He looked round. "I'm afraid I've

nothing to offer you, except . . . peppermint creams." He gave her a shy grin, and held out the box. "Will you have one?"

"Thank you." She took a sweet and bit into it gently.

There was a knock on the door and she started, very slightly. Ainger called, "Who's there?" and Cope came in, very woe-begone, with the tray of crockery.

"I'd forgotten about you," said Ainger. "You've been a time."

"Yes," Cope faltered. "And . . . please, Ainger . . ."

"What?"

He looked down at the wreck on the tray he held.

"I'm afraid I've broken the tea-pot."

He had. It lay in pieces among the cups. There was a silence. Laura's presence was a constraint. She looked down, and then raised her eyes slowly, caught Woodley's and smiled, ever so faintly, a little mutual smile of intimacy.

"Oh!" said Ainger, after a pause. "Well, shove the things into the cupboard, and cut now. I'll see you later, after P.D. By the way, you're in already, aren't you? Well, I'm taking it. See me after."

Cope gulped, bundled the tray noisily in the cupboard and went, with a backward glance at Laura. When the door had shut, she looked at Ainger and let her smile broaden.

"Poor kid!" she said. "What will you do to him for that? Thrash him?"

"I suppose so."

"It seems a pity, but I suppose there's nothing else. Couldn't you stop his pocket money?"

Ainger laughed.

"I think he'd rather be lammed," he said. She sat down again, with a sense of ease now. The incident with Cope seemed to have brought them together, put them on the same side, as it were.

"By the way, I feel terribly ignorant," she said. "But, what is P.D.?"

"Prefects' Detention." Ainger moved. "And I'm afraid I must be going to take it now."

"What do you make them do?"

"Learn poetry by heart."

She laughed.

"What a terrible punishment!" she said, with ironic gravity.

"It is, for most of them, I assure you."

"It never was for me," Woodley interposed. "Rodney gave up putting me in because I learnt it so easily. But you can give most of them the same bit every time, and they never remember it."

"I thought you wrote lines."

"Mr. Simmons forbade it. He says it spoils the handwriting."

"Oh!" She nodded with a grave, assumed assent.

"The poetry is his idea. It's a sort of tradition of the House. I really must go. Good-bye." He held out his hand, awkwardly.

"Good-bye. You're all coming to tea on Sunday, aren't you?"

"Thanks, yes." He swallowed. "We're looking forward to it."

"Are you?" She resisted a temptation to tell him how well she knew he was lying. She only smiled a little, and added "I'm glad." She knew that Woodley was looking at her, and avoided his gaze. "Good-bye."

Ainger bowed stiffly, and got himself out of the room. In the little silence that followed she felt that she should go, yet as awkwardly incapable of making an exit as a schoolboy in a drawing-room. She smiled inwardly at the thought, the exact converse of the situation. She was rooted to her chair, stricken with dumbness by the number of the things

she felt she should not say. She was conscious again of the impropriety of her presence there, embarrassed by the memory of the Armada, uncomfortable at being left alone with Woodley, who stood looking at her expectantly.

Why had she come? What did she want of him? She had forgotten now; she was back in authority, a barrier again between them. How had she thought that he could give her solace, he, a boy with whom almost every avenue of conversation was barred? They could never talk to each other, only exchange sentences across a void, guess perhaps at the things they really felt, and shy away from them. Had they actually lunched in London together, talked across a table as ordinary human beings? Her mind searched for some safe subject to break the discomfort. In another moment she would be paralysed into utter silence. Something non-committal about school. What?

"If writing lines spoils the handwriting," she said at last, with an effort, "doesn't learning poetry as a punishment kill your affection for verse?"

She felt better when she had got that out. They were launched. Soon she would be able to get up and go, quite simply. She would never come back, never attempt to break into their life again.

"Most people haven't any to kill, Mrs. Simmons," he said.

Mrs. Simmons. She seemed to hear her name for the first time. It had a new meaning, as he said it, that gave it, momentarily, a personal quality, belonging to her, curiously, as her own. Always before it had seemed like a label, like a number almost, that had no relation to her as a person, only to her as Simmons's wife. Now in his voice it took a new color; he was speaking to her, calling her by her own name. There was almost flattery in it. Had he really called her Mrs. Simmons? What else could he have said?

"I dare say that's true." She smiled. "Well, doesn't it prevent your ever developing one?"

"Yes. I expect it does." He halted before the memory of dark winter afternoons in P.D.; the ploughman plodding his weary way homeward across the dreary gravel of the playground; the heavy gloom of detention and the melancholy steps in the empty corridors outside wrapping the Elegy in a drab, foggy misery, hearing through its stanzas the doleful clang of the Beadle's bell, as he went his rounds at the end of the hour, and somehow finding it inextricably mixed up with the drowsy tinklings and the beetle's droning flight. Beetle and beadle; it was more than a play on the words, it was a pun of the imagination.

"I shall never know whether Gray's Elegy is a good poem or not. It always brings back P.D. to me. I can't separate it."

"And now you're a prefect you inflict it on others?"

"I have to."

"Well, anyway, it didn't kill your love for poetry."

"No." He smiled at her, and let his eyes rest on the envelope in her lap. She nodded.

"Yes. These are they. I haven't had a chance to give them to you before. It was nice of you to let me have them."

He hesitated obviously before his next remark, and then plunged.

"Mrs. Simmons."

"What?"

"I've been wanting to ask you. My letters . . . are you angry with me?"

"Angry with you?"

"Yes."

"But of course not. Why should I be?"

"I thought perhaps . . . you might have thought them . . . cheek. They weren't meant to be."

"Of course they weren't." She was touched by the concern in his voice. "I knew that. Have you been worrying about it?"

"I have . . . a bit."

"How nice of you. But you needn't have. Of course I didn't think that."

"I'm so glad. I'm afraid I rather let myself go."

Looking up, her eyes met his full upon her, with a sort of pleading intensity in them that caught her breath. She smiled nervously, and looked away, troubled. The silence began to grow too long. She rose and started to inspect the room. He sat watching her. She turned to the groups on the wall, avoiding the intervening drawings.

"Are you in any of these?" she asked.

He rose.

"Yes. Here. That was last year's group." He stood behind her, pointing over her shoulder at the photograph. She laughed, with an unthinking lightness, at the round, chubby face she saw.

"Oh, yes. What a baby you look there." She turned back smilingly to him, and saw that he was flushing, realised that she had been tactless.

"Why do you blush? You were almost a baby, then."

"I was nearly seventeen." His voice was cross, petulant.

"But it seems a long time ago, doesn't it?"

She was pleading with him to put it right, begging him not to be angry at her thoughtlessness. "Don't you feel a terribly different person now? Much more grown-up? More than a year?"

"I feel an awful baby still," he said strangely, perversely, and turned away. Her hand went to her breast. She had hurt him. How? By reminding him that he was a boy, that she thought of him as a child? She looked at his back, turned moodily to her, as he stood kicking with his toe at a knot in the wooden boards of the floor. She was flooded with pity. She wanted to say that she was sorry. Her eyes grew large and full of pain, as though she had hurt an animal. She made a half gesture towards him, and then

checked it. She returned to the photograph for something to say.

"Who's this boy next to you? I know his face, don't I?"

He turned his head to look.

"Herpath. He left last year."

She recalled him, one of the prefects, sleek, silky, insinuating.

"Oh, yes, I remember. A horrid boy." She saw him start at this. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was he a friend of yours?"

"No." He spoke with a quick, low, earnest intensity. "Never a friend. I never liked him . . . much." He added the last word out of a desire for utmost honesty. She smiled at him, reassured, and continued her tour round the room, conscious of him watching her. She came to the table and began looking at the books lying there: a history, an algebra, a novel by "Sapper," some stories of Stephen Leacock, and the volume of Swinburne. It seemed to haunt their meetings. She raised her eyebrows smilingly.

"So you brought him back to school with you?"

"Yes."

"There are better than Swinburne, though. Have you discovered Shelley yet?"

"Yes." He leaned forward eagerly, his eyes a little wide, and began, almost unconsciously, to recite.

> Swiftly walk o'er the Western Wave,
> Spirit of night. . . .

Laura found herself joining softly, taking up the second verse, losing herself in the poetry.

> Blind with thine hair the eyes of day;
> Kiss her until she be wearied out,
> Then wander o'er city, and sea, and land,
> Touching all with thine opiate wand—
> Come, long-sought!

On the last line he broke in, smiling, and they ended together, their voices in unison. Then he looked away from her.

"It's wonderful!" he whispered, pressing his palm on the back of a chair. She nodded gently. There was a tiny silence that was a consciousness of beauty, palpable almost, between them. She did not want to move, but to hold the moment that seemed suspended in time, as though they had somehow become freed from their surroundings and their personalities.

Then the door opened, and Simmons came in. The moment was shattered. He was wearing his gown and his mortar-board, a gaunt, lean, angular figure, and looked with surprise at Laura as he closed the door behind him.

"You here, Laura?" he said.

"Yes," she answered him timidly. She was annoyingly conscious of guilt, like a child caught at the jam-cupboard. He raised his eyebrows, but made no comment.

"I came to look for Ainger," he said.

"He went out a few minutes ago."

"He's taking P.D., sir," said Woodley.

"Oh? Well, I hope he enjoys it." Simmons gave a sour smile. "You might ask him to see me after Chapel." He turned to Laura. "It isn't often that you condescend to visit the school."

"No. I know."

"And has our young friend Woodley, here, been entertaining you?" There was an irony in his tone which gave a challenging note to Laura's reply.

"Yes. Very pleasantly."

They looked at each other for a moment, and there was a curious defiance in the poise of Laura's head. Simmons was annoyed, and let his anger vent itself in sarcasm, his voice taking on a sort of curl to its edges.

"Woodley is our Poet Laureate, you know, only he writes

a good deal more than most Laureates. A dreamer . . . native wood-notes wild, and all that. An infant Shelley, eh, Woodley?"

"Am I?" Woodley spoke sullenly.

"Why this sudden modesty, when you flaunt your rhapsodies before the world? Of course you are," he turned, smiling crookedly, to Laura. "We take ourselves very seriously . . . eyes in fine frenzy rolling . . . wear our hair long, don't we?" He touched a lock of the boy's hair. Woodley flinched and moved aside. There was a momentary blaze in Laura's eyes, instantly extinguished into shadow, as she said quickly:

"Frank, we must be going. It's later than I thought."

Simmons ignored this; he was enjoying himself.

"Perhaps you read his effusion in the school magazine? I . . . er . . . forget the title. What was it, Woodley?" Woodley remained silent. "Eh?"

"I remember," Laura said. "'Reverie.' I liked it." There was more than a challenge here; it was a signal to Woodley, a message of sympathy. He looked up gratefully at her, but she would not meet his eyes. Simmons was put out.

"'Reverie'? Oh, yes. . . . A dreamer, as I said. Dark-eyed maidens and romantic moons, or something equally affecting, wasn't it? I trust it was generally appreciated, Woodley. But, then, poets never are, are they? They thrive on disregard; always spurned and misunderstood in their lifetime. Well, perhaps you'll have the laugh of us when you're dead, and they set your verses to be learned by heart in P.D., if that's any consolation to you. You're looking forward to dying young, I presume?"

Woodley stood perfectly still, looking straight in front of him, his face expressionless. Simmons turned away to the table, at peace with himself, and began examining the books.

"What's this? Swinburne, eh? You admire Swinburne, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nauseous stuff." He threw the book down. Woodley looked up at Laura, shyly, and she smiled at him, a little deprecating smile that was almost a shrug of the shoulders.

"They all do at your age," Simmons went on. "It's a form of intellectual measles. You'll grow out of it."

"Frank, I must go." Laura's voice cut through this, imperatively.

"I'm coming. All the same, a little time on the Binomial wouldn't exactly do you any harm, Woodley. Not quite as enthralling as Mr. Swinburne's lilies and languors, perhaps, but a good deal healthier I can assure you." He nodded with a smug satisfaction. "You'll tell Ainger I want to see him. Are these yours, Laura?" He pointed to her bag and the envelope in the chair.

"Oh, yes." She retrieved them quickly, and stood a moment with the poems in her hand, wondering whether she could give them to Woodley.

"What's in that envelope?" Simmons asked.

"This? Oh, nothing." She hesitated. "Only some recipes Mrs. Ratcliffe lent me."

She went quickly to the door, turned and smiled at Woodley, murmured "Good-bye," and went out. Simmons followed her.

As soon as they were out of ear-shot he turned to her.

"What were you doing in the Prefects' Room?" he asked. Laura expected the question. She realised that she had involved herself in a silly, ensnaring tangle of lies, like weeds; a tangle for which there was no justification beyond an instinct that she could not tell Simmons the truth, though for whose sake, her own or Woodley's, she did not know. Suppose she were to say quite simply and frankly: "I went there because I wanted to see Woodley. I lied to you when I

said that these were recipes. They're his poems. He sent them to me to read, and I wanted to return them to him." Why not? Was it for her own sake? Surely not. If she lied, it was for him, to save him from Simmons's sarcasm and ridicule.

But was that all? Had it not gone further than that by now? Was she not also trying to safeguard something that they shared between them, a sympathy and an understanding which belonged, now, just to the two of them; to safeguard it, not because it was a guilty thing, but because it was a precious thing and a fragile thing that a touch could destroy, because it had been born in the shadow of their separate loneliness and lay, now, like a pool of light between two dark bands of trees? She did not know. She knew only that she had his confidence, which she must keep inviolate, and that she valued it, as she had valued nothing in her life before, and that therefore she must lie again. But she might as well be economical in her lying, all the more so as she knew herself to be bad at it, because she hated it. The good liar is the liar who enjoys lying, who treats it as an art. She repeated the Armada story, conscious of its ineptitude, yet aware that it was so weak an invention as almost to carry a conviction of truth. Simmons grunted.

"Hm! But what did you want to go to them for? If you wanted to know a thing like that you could have gone to the History Library or asked Plunkett. It's his subject. He's bound to have a history at his house. Why didn't you go over and ask Mrs. Plunkett?"

"I thought you weren't on speaking terms with him. About this Riley business."

"Oh! So you know about that, do you?"

"Yes. Mrs. Ratcliffe's been telling me." She refrained from comment.

"And was that why you didn't go to Plunkett?"

"No. As a matter of fact it wasn't." She must be honest,

within the limits of her deception. "Quite frankly, it never occurred to me. I just thought the boys would be sure to have a history."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't. I've never heard of anything so ridiculous. You can't go wandering about the place like that. It's unheard of."

"I know. I'm sorry. I won't do it again." They continued their walk home in silence.

After they had left him, Woodley remained standing where he was, quite still, by the table, thinking, thinking of Laura, in a dazed bewilderment. She had been sorry for him; she had taken his part against Simmons in saying that she liked his poems, and, just now, when she went out, she had lied to save him from ridicule, pretending that his poems were recipes.

A flood of gratitude swept over him, and yet he wished that she had not done so. To have lied seemed to cheapen her, even though it had been for his sake. She should be beyond lies; she should be all truth. He thought of her romantically, the personification of all his ideals, of honour and fineness and beauty. She had been hurt by Simmy's sarcasm, because it was levelled at him, and she was sorry for him; he wanted to go and tell her that it didn't matter, that he was used to it, and that no one took any notice of Simmy anyway, that that was just his way. But she must know that, being his wife. Or didn't she? Was he like that at home with her? Was he sarcastic to her? Woodley found anger rising in him. Surely he couldn't treat her like that, as he treated the boys, bully her and make fun of her? She was so sweet and gentle and lovely. She loved beautiful things; she had pity and understanding. She was sorry even for Cope, because he was going to be thrashed for breaking the tea-pot. He had a sudden impulse to dash off to Ainger and tell him to let Cope off this time, to say that Mrs. Simmy had begged him off. Yes, he would do that. He

wanted to do something for her. He wouldn't tell her. No one would tell her. But that didn't matter; it was something done for her sake. He felt a little thrill of pleasure in the notion. He would find Ainger now, before P.D. was over. Ainger would understand, if he said it was Mrs. Simmy who had asked it. Ainger liked her too. There was no need to tell Vining or Milner. It would be a little secret gesture of devotion. In a burst of resolution he ran up to the Detention-room.

IX

AINGER acceded to his request, and told Cope bluntly that he was going to be let off this time, and that he had Mrs. Simmy to thank for it. Cope received the information somewhat impassively, and went away whistling.

"It's pretty cool cheek, all the same," Ainger said, "for her to come interfering in House matters like that." Woodley did not answer; he merely thanked him, and went back to his Prep. Later that evening Vining, who had heard of Laura's visit, began improvising on his favourite theme.

"Fancy her coming after you like that, Ainger! The lady grows bolder! History repeats itself. Joseph and Potiphar's wife. You'd make a good Joseph, Ainger. Did you leave your blazer behind you? I can just see old Simmy in the rôle of Potiphar. Good headlines for the *Daily Mail*. 'House-master's wife accuses prefect of rape. Tell-tale blazer left behind. House-captain expelled.' You know, Ainger, it's too bad of you; you shouldn't disappoint a lady like that. After all, you're not such a bad-looking chap. Bit of a change after him. Can't say that I should care about being mauled by old Simmy if I was a girl. I do think you might have been a bit more obliging, wrapping up your chastity like that!"

Woodley was revolted, a boiling ferment of rage and disgust, which he realised he could not express without appearing ridiculous.

Cope, reprieved from a licking, was not so much grateful as puzzled. His day had been a bewildering one. First the Assembly, which had left him foggily curious; the few members of the Lower School who knew, or thought they knew, what it was all about were secretive on the subject,

anxious neither to yield the superiority which their knowledge gave them, nor to reveal its meagre quality. When he sought enlightenment they merely grinned mysteriously and irritatingly, intimating that it was something very juicy and flavorous and intriguing. His own especial friend, Morby, was, unfortunately, among the uninitiated. They debated it together. Morby had an idea that it was somehow connected with babies, and it was known that one of the housemaids in Plunkett's had left suddenly. Morby thought that she had probably had a baby and that the baby was Riley's. Further than that his imagination would not go. He urged Cope to take advantage of Vining's offer to explain the situation; not being in the Tree House himself, he did not know Vining.

"He's no end of a beast," said Cope. "Probably twist my wrist half off if I did ask him. I bet he was only ragging when he said that, just to get me to, so that he could have another chance to bully me. You don't know him." He told Morby about Laura's intervention on his behalf, and Morby said:

"Coo-er, you are lucky. Catch Mrs. Ratty doing anything like that. She's a holy terror, with her false teeth, and her wig that doesn't fit; always patting you on the head and asking questions. Do you like Mrs. Simmy?" Cope didn't know. He had never had anything to do with her. He saw her walking about sometimes, and usually remembered to pull off his cap just after she had passed him, but he had never spoken to her. He had never thought very much about her. He knew very little about women, and was not interested. He knew that you clicked your tongue and winked if you saw a boy talking to a girl, or, usually, even if a girl's name or the word "girl" was mentioned, but he didn't know why. It was just an accepted form of badinage. The masters' wives he lumped together as a lot of old hens; he had never considered Laura separately from the rest. He

had hoped vaguely, the day before, when he saw her in the Prefects' Room, that her presence might spare him the full explosion of wrath that he knew he merited, but he had not bothered to wonder for more than a moment what she was doing there.

He remembered Vining's suggestion that he should refer his question about Riley to her. He had not taken it seriously at the time; it had made no impression on him beyond being another of Vining's jokes, but, now that she had begged him off a licking, it seemed possible that she might tell him what he wanted to know.

Why she had done so he had no idea, but he found himself regarding her in a new light. He began to feel sentimental about her, and was both surprised and ashamed at the emotion. The only other people about whom he had ever felt sentimental were Ainger and his own mother, and both of these were permissible devotions. Ainger, as house-captain and an athletic blood, was one of those for whom hero-worship was entirely legitimate, and loving your mother was the usual thing. You might pretend that her solicitousness and her demonstrativeness were a bit of a bore, but after all she had sat up with you when you had earache as a kid, and been frightfully decent and sympathetic and understanding in all kinds of ways; you mightn't talk much about it, in fact you wouldn't, but on the other hand it was quite right to love her, and nothing to be ashamed of, and any boy who said he didn't you would regard as a cad who wanted booting. Any other kind of sentimental interest in a human being, however, was just sloshy.

The springs of affection in Cope's small heart had never been tapped; he was not in the least fond of Morby, for example, any more than the average child is fond of the child next door, with whom it is sent to play. Morby and Cope shared the same forms of collectors' mania, a few

undying hatreds of masters and seniors, and a number of extremely feeble jokes, but that was all. When he found himself experiencing emotions of gratitude and even of minor romance towards Mrs. Simmy, therefore, he kept it to himself. These emotions were not of a kind in the least likely to endure, but for twenty-four hours they were quite strong.

The following afternoon there was a House match, and Cope was dutifully in attendance, sucking sweets. Cricket bored him rather, but it was better than afternoon school. He saw Simmy watching, a little way away, and observed that Mrs. Simmy was not with him. It occurred to him to go up to the house and see if she were at home, when he might take the opportunity to thank her for begging him off his licking and to ask her, perhaps, what it was that Riley had done. He might at any rate satisfy his curiosity as to the exacter details of generation and procreation which, all the more so since he had questioned his mother on the subject, were a troublesomely nebulous worry to him and quite obviously germane to the Riley problems. He left the field unobtrusively, and went up to the private entrance to Simmy's house.

A parlourmaid opened the door. Was Mrs. Simmons at home? Might he see her? The parlourmaid asked his name, and he said Mr. Cope. Presently he was shown into a pretty chintz drawing-room, that was simple and charming and very unlike the drab ugly formality of his own home in Liverpool. It made him feel very small and grubby. For the first time since he came to Mallowhurst he was ashamedly aware of his inky collar and fingers, his broken knotted bootlaces, the three missing metal hooks on his boots, and the grimy handkerchief in which, on the doorstep, he had secreted the sweet on which he was engaged. He felt extremely awkward, and very like a little boy.

Laura was playing the piano when he entered; she rose

and came towards him, looking down at him with a grave, smiling serenity, asked him what she could do for him, and put him into a large comfortable armchair, seating herself opposite him, quietly expectant. He began by reminding her of the tea-pot accident and thanking her for asking Ainger to let him off, at which she seemed surprised, and then, without quite knowing how he got there, found himself in the middle of a long and not very clear account of his life and duties as a fag, and his difficulties over pocket money and punishments. Laura seemed very interested. Then he pulled himself up suddenly.

"But that wasn't why I came," he said. "Not really."

"What was?" asked Laura.

"Well, there was something I wanted to know, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me. No one else will."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well, it's about Riley. You know, he's just been expelled, and nobody'll tell me why. The Head talked an awful lot in Assembly, but I didn't know what it was about, except that it had to do with purity. Do you know what it is?"

Laura stared at him in amazement, taken aback by the directness of his attack, and suspecting that he was doing it for a rag.

"Yes, I know," she said quietly.

"I wish you'd tell me. I want to know, awfully."

"Well, it's hardly a question that I . . ." She broke off. "Why did you come to me?"

"Well, I asked the prefects and they wouldn't tell me. I know it's something . . ." He found himself tied up for a word. He couldn't very well say "dirty," or even the nursery equivalent "rude." He began to grow embarrassed.

"Something what?"

"Well, something . . . something . . . not quite . . . polite."

"Oh!" she blinked.

"It's got something to do with babies, hasn't it?"

"Babies?"

"Hasn't it? Morby thought it had."

"What could it have to do with babies?"

"I don't know. I thought perhaps somebody had had one. Morby said one of the housemaids . . ."

"But what would that have to do with Riley?"

"Well, Morby said . . ."

"Who is Morby?"

"He's my friend. He's in Ratty's—I mean Mr. Ratcliffe's. Riley was, too, you know. And he said one of the housemaids had left. He thought perhaps she had had a baby and it was Riley's. Is that it?"

"Are you doing this for a joke?" she asked, suddenly, in a quiet, level tone.

"No, I wasn't! Honour bright, I wasn't. Won't you tell me?"

"I don't think I'm quite the right person for you to ask."

"Why not?"

"Well," she found herself blushing, "it's rather an awkward question. How much do you know about these things?"

"Not very much. I know how babies are born . . . more or less . . . but I don't know what makes them come. I know that when people live together, a woman usually has a baby. I read a book it happened in. But I don't quite see how it could be that. I mean Riley and the housemaid haven't been living together. I think Morby must be wrong."

Laura was helpless. She felt she had neither the right nor the capacity to instruct Cope in what he wanted to know,

yet disapproved the idea of sending him away with the whole thing still a furtive mystery. But she would have to talk to Simmons about it before she could commit herself.

"I'm afraid I can't talk to you now," she said at last. "You see it's hardly my . . . my province. I don't want to put you off, but it's very difficult for me. If you will wait just a little while, and not worry about it, and come back to-morrow or the next day, then either I or Mr. Simmons will tell you what you want to know. It's silly to make a mystery of things like that. It's something that you've got to know, one day at any rate, and it's much better for someone to tell you properly than for you to find it out, secretly, for yourself. Only, it's a little awkward for me, that's all. So, will you come back?" Cope nodded. He was impressed and a little subdued, as though he had been in church. He felt that it was all very grave and solemn. As he stood up to go, the parlourmaid came in with a telegram on a silver tray which she handed to Laura.

"Will you excuse me?" Laura said to Cope, and tore open the envelope. She read the telegram:

Your father seriously hurt in accident now in hospital Windermere condition dangerous come at once.

The signature was that of a neighbour at her home. She stared at the message with wide, dark eyes, and then said quietly:

"There's no answer, Maud, thank you."

She turned back to Cope, knitting her brows in puzzlement for a moment, as though she had forgotten who he was, and then said:

"I wonder if you would mind doing something for me? I think Mr. Simmons is watching the match. Would you take a note down to him for me?"

"Yes, rather!"

She went to her desk, and wrote a few lines on a single sheet of notepaper, which she put, with the telegram, into an envelope. Cope stood watching her with the slightly detached interest with which one looks at a street car accident after the police have taken charge. She gave him the note.

"As quick as you can, please. It's rather important. You can go out through the garden." She pointed to the French windows that opened on to the lawn. Cope pushed the note into his pocket, where it caught among the other contents and bent, and then made a hasty exit, running across the grass, remembering afterwards that he had forgotten to say good-bye, and wondering if he oughtn't to go back and do so. He found Simmons talking to Ratcliffe on the steps of the pavilion, and said: "If you please, sir, your wife asked me to give you this note. She said it was important." He pulled it out of his pocket, sticky and a good deal crumpled. Simmons took it with distaste.

"I hardly imagine that it was in this condition when Mrs. Simmons gave it you," he said. "Nor do I think that a detective would have much difficulty in describing the contents of your pocket, Cope. I suspect the presence of toffee, at any rate. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Incredible, Holmes! It passes understanding." Then he opened the note and his face changed. He drew his thin lips into a long, narrow crease, turned to Ratcliffe, said, "I must go," and strode back to his house.

Cope pulled out his handkerchief, inspected the disused sweet gummed therein, decided it was unattractive, took a new one from the bag in his pocket, and went off to speculate with Morby on the contents of Laura's telegram. Morby thought perhaps a previous husband had turned up, or that Laura might be being blackmailed.

Going north in the train, Laura sat and stared out of the

window with dull, blank eyes. She had prepared herself for the worst of news on her arrival, and her only hope was that she might reach Windermere in time to see her father alive. Simmons had been kindly in his good-bye, kissing her more affectionately than he had done for some time; his kisses were usually inspired either by habit or concupiscence, but he was fond of her father and genuinely shocked by the news of his accident. He put her quite tenderly into her train, and bought her *Punch* and the *Spectator* to read. These lay beside her on the seat, the *Spectator* unopened, and *Punch* thrown aside after an impatient glance at the pictures, its humour seeming an impertinence. The other occupants of her carriage were three young men going on a golfing holiday, stocky and aggressively cheery in plus fours. They were to pick up a former schoolfellow, whom they had not seen for some time, at Preston, and they exchanged personal reminiscences of him throughout the journey, talking of him heartily as "old Ted," with a maddening recurrence. Laura reflected that there is a certain type of young man who does everything in a quartet.

She tried to think of her father, but her mind would not work consecutively; it presented pictures of him in little, isolated incidents, scenes from her youth: her father bending over his rock garden, planting little bits of saxifrage, or wild flowers that he had picked on a walk; her father in a brown velvet smoking jacket, sitting opposite her at their evening meal, with the candles on the polished wood of the table throwing the rest of the cottage sitting-room into a dusky shadow; her father, in a wide-brimmed hat and shepherd's plaid cape, leading her on board the steamer and putting her in charge of the stewardess on their trip to Ireland; her father standing beside Simmons and herself in the vestry of the church at her wedding, and the vision of him standing on the little porch, waving a silk handker-

chief in good-bye, as she and Simmons drove away in the hired car. The physical image of him was very clear to her, with his thick, bushy grey hair and his greying brown moustache, a face not unlike that of Mr. Lloyd George. The pictures came between her and the quiet countryside, gold and green, slanted across by late afternoon shadows, through which the train was carrying her, but they seemed somehow unrelated to her—pictures only.

When she tried to focus her mind on what his death would mean to her, to see it as an incident in her own life, she found that she could not; her brain went following after little tags of quotations, snatches of songs, pictures of the playing-fields at Mallowhurst, or her own drawing-room, with Simmons and three other masters playing bridge, pictures of her home and herself and her father again, but never making a coherent pattern. Her mind would only visualise; it refused to think. Presently she took out a cigarette. One of the young men offered her a match; she smiled at him absently, let him light it for her, and then allowed it to go out, unsmoked, between her fingers. He gave her another match and she lit it again, but again it went out. She held it like that, unrealising, for an hour, and then threw it out of the window.

As time wore on, her brain grew tired, refused even its procession of pictures, and she lay back against the cushions, staring ahead of her, in a vacancy that was a mere ache of nothingness.

When, at last, she reached Windermere, she found that she was too late. Her father had died a few hours before her arrival. Walking absent-mindedly along a country road, he had been knocked down by a motor-car and had never regained consciousness. He was buried two days later in Rydal churchyard, Laura and a couple of neighbours being the only people present at the funeral.

Alone in the cottage in which she had been born and

brought up, or walking the roads and the hills where she had spent her childhood, she made an effort to survey her life. With her father's death had disappeared her last link with the past; Mallowhurst was now the whole of her existence. The realisation appalled her; it seemed as though the world were narrowing down to a pin-point. She felt like one cut off by the tide, watching the water creep up and round him, until only the tiny rock on which he stands is left uncovered. Mallowhurst; and that meant frustration, a walled seclusion from reality, from the stream of life.

Her personal grief for her father's death was less than her misery for its significance in this respect; since her marriage she had, partly out of loyalty and partly out of a sense of self-protection, withdrawn a great part of the intimacy that had previously existed between her father and herself. As she had grown more and more to realise the mistake that her marriage had been, and the unhappiness of her existence, so she had more and more evaded her father, unwilling to burden him with her troubles or to seek pity for a situation which there was no mending. She felt now almost a relief that she had arrived too late to see him alive, remembering his letter of the previous term and knowing that, had he realised he was dying, his thoughts and anxieties would have been strained for her unhappiness, and that she would have been driven to lie, to assume a false cheerfulness, in order that he might leave the world happy, that he might never know the emptiness in her heart. If she were unhappy now, there would be no one who would care, no one to whom it would matter; she realised this simply, without self-pity, as a statement of fact merely—finding it, strangely, almost a comforting thought.

Her father left very little money, beyond a life insurance which was heavily mortgaged; the cottage with its con-

tents he bequeathed to her, and she decided that she would keep it, even though she might never live there, because, with the consciousness of its existence, waiting for her, she could not feel wholly an exile. If she sold that, she would, she knew, never return to the Lakes; she could not come back, as a tourist, to stay at an hotel.

As she sat watching the reeded, wind-flecked silver of the lake, under the ash-grey evening sky, with the mists twisting and wreathing round the great, soft shapes of the hills, while the faltering light died about her, watching the tiny ripples creep and shake on the water, she knew that she must keep her home as a last symbol that she belonged to all this, so that she might not be utterly uprooted. She wrote her decision to Simmons, knowing that he would disapprove, yet determined not to yield in it. She did not know when, if ever, she would come back, but her home would be there, as a refuge; she could know always that there was peace and gentleness and beauty waiting for her. In writing to him her thoughts went back to Mallowhurst, now, after three days only, curiously remote and unreal, as the glare and light and colour of the South seem incredible among the grey mists and windy shadows of the North. She did not want to return; she wanted to stay here and cherish her loneliness in a setting that was in sympathy with her mood; to go back would be like passing from a twilit room into the stare of naked light.

She wrote that she was staying on a few days longer to put things in order, and that she would be back some time during the following week. She cherished this respite, tragic though its cause was, and smiled at the thought of the life that was going on without her, of the one dreary Sunday at least that she would miss. This Sunday, the prefects were coming to tea, and she wondered if Simmons would put them off because of her absence as hostess. She visualised the room, and their attitudes in their chairs, and

the bored, polite expressions upon their faces, masking whatever was in their minds, as she had so often sat and looked at them, as though staring at a door of frosted glass to which she had no key.

With Woodley, now, that door had been opened ever so slightly, and she had been allowed to catch a glimpse of what lay behind, a glimpse as of fields, dew-drenched in an early morning sunlight, bright with the gold of buttercups, banded with the shining ribbon of a stream. She thought of the last time she had seen him, in the Prefects' Room, and saw him again standing sulkily, staring before him, with a sullen droop to his whole body, under Simmons's sarcasm, and anger rose in her, anger and pity and tenderness warring with each other. She thought of him as he would be at tea alone with Simmons and the other prefects, realising, too, how he would miss her presence there, knowing with a sudden instinct how his eyes would sweep the room, looking for her.

She sat a long time thinking of him, puzzled by the way he had of coming suddenly between her and her surroundings, as an almost tangible presence in the room. She seemed to see him sitting at the table, leaning forward, under the candle-light that caught the glint of dull gold in his hair. She rose half impatiently, but the vision of him would not leave her; there was a strange stirring in her. She could not dismiss him. She sat down at the desk, and began to write him a note.

My dear Woodley,

I am writing this because I shan't be there for tea on Sunday. I was called away very suddenly three days ago by the news that my father had met with an accident, and he died before I could get here. I shall be staying on a few days longer, settling up my home. It is so very beautiful here now, everything green and bursting with spring.

I hope to see you when I get back and to return you your poems, which I had no chance of doing the other afternoon. Circumstances were against us.

Yours sincerely,
Laura Simmons.

She knew, subconsciously, as she wrote, that she was wrong in doing so, that there was no need for it. Her absence from the Sunday tea and the returning of his poems were the merest of excuses. The writing of the letter, though this she hardly realised, was a gratification of her own impulse towards him, an impulse that had not clarified itself in her consciousness. It gave her pleasure to write. Of its effect on him she scarcely thought; she was being impelled by a force within herself that she did not understand.

She posted the letter that evening, and, in the morning, regretted having done so; her mind, rested by sleep, now found the fixed envisioning thought of him that had driven her to write receding, diminishing, so that she saw him as a boy again, to whom she stood in distance, a boy of charm and grace and sensitiveness, yet no longer with the intimate, personal relation to herself that had brought him, last night, so clearly before her.

At Mallowhurst, the Riley affair left behind it an atmosphere, like a faintly unpleasant odour, that pervaded the place, manifesting itself in a spirit of unrest, especially in the Tree House. Simmons's "Pi-Jaw" to the prefects caused between them a dissension and a divergence of attitude greater than had previously been manifest. Here, in the proposed Purity Campaign, was a definite question of policy, in which Milner stood with Vining, and Woodley with Ainger.

Vining had too much respect for Ainger openly to defy him or to work against him, but he was capable, by smutty

ridicule and mocking contempt, of making himself a good deal more than a negative quality, evading with the same weapons any definite tackling of the question, any coming out into the open, merely interposing himself as a nuisance and an obstacle to any tactics that Ainger wished to adopt. The position was rendered all the more difficult by the fact that Ainger, while approving Simmons's theme, resented his attitude and his treatment; although he was anxious to do what he could in pulling the House together, assuming that it needed it, he did not wish to do so under Simmons's banner. Any action on his part he wanted to be a friendly, unofficial thing, and, had the prefects been together, this would have been easy to achieve, but internal disagreement, coupled with the self-inflicted denial of external authority or assistance, made his position an invidious one. Such disagreements as existed in the Prefects' Room must be kept private. The result was strained relations between the four, and a hostile, irritable attitude of inactivity towards authority. On Woodley, in particular, all this had an unfortunate effect, intensifying his dislike of Vining, and spreading it to Milner. Ainger, worried and thwarted, he found less helpful, less confident than he had hoped; a general bad temper set in about the school that infected him with a surly moodiness and cynicism that he took small pains to conceal.

Simmons, in charge of the House, was in a mood of sour irritation. The letter of protest which he and Ratcliffe had composed, asking for a vote of censure on Plunkett, had been badly received by a meeting of the masters, already fretted and annoyed by the indefinite charge of dissatisfaction that seemed to be levelled against them. Moreover he felt that there was something wrong in the House. He could not put his finger on the exact cause, but he disapproved the general tone, sensing what he diagnosed as a sort of unhealthy brooding. The talk that he had given the

prefects seemed to have borne no fruit. He had no confidence in the prefects, and he guessed that they had scant respect for him.

He was not at all sure that they were not responsible for a lot of the trouble. He had never approved of the prefect system. It undermined the authority of the house-master. Now and then you got a set who were respectful and obedient, who reported things, consulted your policy and paid you deference, but they never seemed to have much authority with the boys, who thought them suckers-up, and defied them where they could. He knew that the present four were pretty popular, but he disliked them. Their manner of late had been most offensive, nothing tangible perhaps, but definitely objectionable. Contemptuous lip-service, that was all he got from them, all of them, and from young Woodley in particular. For some reason his discontent and his irritation seemed to centre on Woodley, the very sight of whom walking about the Quad. moved him to annoyance. There was a sort of superiority about that boy. It was all this intellectual flapdoodle, imagining himself too good for everyone, all this rubbish about writing poetry, not healthy or normal in a boy. It all came down to the same thing. Sex. "Dark-eyed maidens, supple-limbed!" Faugh! That was what it was, sex. It was at the bottom of all the trouble. The school was going through a bad period. These things came in waves. A few of the wrong men at the top, and the harm was done. He worked himself into a state of gloomy, nagging ill-temper which found an outlet, partly in a long letter that he wrote to Laura on the subject, in answer to her note, and partly in a monologue that he delivered in Campbell's rooms.

Campbell's fiancée and her mother had come down to pay him a visit, staying at the "Lion" in the town, and out of courtesy, in Laura's absence, he had invited Simmons to come round one evening. Simmons's first impulse had been

to refuse, but a desire to air his grievances and his theories finally induced him to accept. He sat, hunched up in an armchair, his pipe between his teeth, expounding his ideas about education from half-past eight until nearly eleven. He enjoyed himself. He almost forgot his dislike of Campbell in the auto-intoxication of his talk, and was satirically genial with the ladies. Madeleine, Campbell's fiancée, began by trying to argue with him, but a faint frown from Campbell warned her, and she desisted, relapsing for the rest of the evening into an amazed silence of indignation, of which Simmons was not unaware, doing nothing thereby to increase his affection for Campbell. Her mother, however, listened deferentially, flattering Simmons's vanity, so that he addressed himself for the most part to her. When he had gone Madeleine burst out:

"My God, Terry, are they all like that?"

"Most of them, more or less. Simmons is a bit worse than the average, perhaps."

"Will you be like that one day?"

"I hope not. That's my one fear, that if I remain a schoolmaster I shall go the same way. They nearly all do."

"I know, but you're not going to remain a schoolmaster."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, but you're not! You know you're not. You know it's only a temporary thing with you."

"That's what they all said, once."

"Yes, but you'll get to Cambridge. Or write."

"I expect most of them said that, too."

"Terry, how ghastly! What is it makes them like that? What gives them that . . . that domineering, self-conscious attitude of the pedagogue that hangs around them like a halo?"

"I don't know. Just being in authority, perhaps. That, and the rut of it. Never talking to anybody but boys and other schoolmasters. Always having to think of dignity

and position. I dare say Simmons wasn't such a bad chap once. He's a crashing bore, of course, and a self-satisfied prig, but . . ."

"What's his wife like?"

"Nice. I like her."

"Young?"

"Quite."

"Poor wretch! Or doesn't she see it?"

"Yes, I think she does."

Madeleine's mother looked up from the knitting which she had been doing all the evening.

"What are you two talking about?" she asked. "I thought Mr. Simmons a very nice man. I thought he was most interesting about education."

"Oh, mother!" Madeleine laughed.

"I did. I thought he was quite right in nearly everything he said. It's all very well for you to talk, Madeleine, but you haven't had boys of your own, and I have. They're very difficult to manage. And I don't know what Terry wants to leave here for. A schoolmaster's is a very nice job. Look at the holidays you get."

"Yes. If it wasn't for those I wouldn't be able to stick it. But when you get older you don't even make use of that. Nearly all the house-masters stay down here."

"If we have children, Terry" (her mother raised her eyes from her work, blinked, and went back to it), "what are we going to do about their education? If they're boys, I mean. Will you want them to go to a Public School?"

"Yes, I think I shall," Campbell spoke without hesitation. "It's funny. There's an awful lot that's wrong with the scheme, but I don't like any of the alternatives. Day-school, co-education, private tutoring; they're none of them much good. The Public School's like marriage, a rotten institution, but better than anything anybody's been able to suggest to take its place."

"Is it? Why shouldn't they go to a private school until they're about fourteen, and then finish their education abroad?"

"I don't know. Boys who do that usually turn out queer."

"What do you mean by queer? Just . . . just not the Public School type?"

"I suppose so. Only the Public School type is a good type. Look at me." He laughed.

"Yes, Terry. Look at you. God knows how you managed to be what you are. You must have been born with a kink that wouldn't be ironed out."

"Ironed out?"

"Isn't that the aim of the Public School system? To iron out kinks?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. And after all, Madeleine, there's this to be said for it. If they're not very strong kinks . . . personalities, I suppose, would be a better word . . . then they might just as well *be* ironed out, and you'll get the normal, decent, standard Public School Englishman. And if a boy's got any originality worth having, then he'll keep it whatever you do to him."

"That doesn't seem to me an argument in favour of the system. It's a bit negative, isn't it?"

"Yes, perhaps. I don't know. But I do know that I don't want my sons . . . our sons . . . to be the type that's brought up in the shade, so to speak, privately and abroad. It may be good for their intellects, but it's damned bad for their manners. I'd rather they mixed with other boys, and got knocked about at a place like Mallowhurst, and hated it, than that they were brought up in sophistication on the Continent and liked it. Conservative of me, I admit, but that's how I feel."

"You'd risk putting them in charge of a man like Mr. Simmons?"

"Yes, quite frankly I would. They'd dislike him cor-

dially, and they'd miss an awful lot that I wish they could have, trust and confidence and friendship with the masters, things I try to give them and get sat on for doing so, but . . . oh, don't mistake me, Madeleine, I hate Simmons, and I hate this place, and nearly everybody in it, but it stands for something, and I believe it's worth while, that's all."

"You're very tolerant all of a sudden, Terry. It's not like you."

"I'm English. What was good enough for my grandfathers . . ."

"Jolly well ought not to be good enough for your sons."

"If you'll supply something better, my dear, it jolly well won't be. Meanwhile, we do what we can."

"Yes."

Madeleine turned away. Her mother rolled up her knitting, pushed it into a bag, and they went home to their hotel.

X

SIMMONS did not cancel the prefects' tea on Sunday. He received them alone, explaining briefly that Laura had been called away, and took advantage of her absence to air his dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the House, treating the occasion rather as a prefects' meeting than as a social gathering.

Woodley was disappointed not to find Laura there. He had been thinking about her a great deal during the past few days. He could not rid himself of his memory of her, standing in the Prefects' Room, dark and beautiful; of the softness of her voice, almost a whisper, as she spoke the Shelley; the movement of her mouth, framing the words, as though she loved them; the shadowed, troubled gentleness of her eyes. It seemed incredible that she had been there, that she had lied for him, that there had been those moments of intimacy between them, the memory of which now caught, curiously, at his heart. It seemed somehow, in retrospect, as though something had been said between them there which he knew had not been said, some word of secrecy between them. He could not remember. They seemed to have said so little, and yet that meeting, those few moments when they had talked, and talked of things of no significance, seemed now to take on in memory a colour, like the after-glow of sunset, that enriched it in his brain, where he treasured it in retrospect as one might a picture.

He had a new consciousness of her, a recurrent memory of her physical presence in the room, graced with a sort of tragic loveliness, stamped upon his mind. The next few times, indeed, that he entered the room he experienced a

sense of disappointment that it was empty of her; he found himself looking for her there when he came in, unreasoningly, knowing nothing that would bring her there, yet with the dream that by some miracle she might come. He began to invent imaginary meetings, that went no further than meetings. He did not know what he wanted of her, save that he wanted to see her, to be in her presence. All that was romantic in him rushed forward to the stimulus of this one memory. He pictured himself performing deeds of heroism for her sake, unspecified yet glorious, services of gallantry to win her approval. He wanted to give her presents, he did not know what presents, but simply to make some offering to her. He thought of books or flowers.

On the Saturday afternoon he spent two hours inspecting the meagre resources of the Mallowhurst shops, comparing them with the still more meagre resources of his pocket. There seemed nothing worthy of her, nothing that he felt he could give her. There were a few editions-de-luxe in the show-case at Crawley's, volumes illustrated by Rackham and Dulac, that he wished he could afford. He asked their price of the red-haired girl, who said with a bold smile of intimacy, "Oh, they're very expensive. More than your pocket money will let you pay, I'm sure," and he blushed. She was watching him as he lingered by the shelves, whispering to her friend behind the counter and giggling, until he left the shop in embarrassment. As he went out he could not resist turning back to see if she were still looking at him. Her eyes followed him down the street.

He looked forward to the Sunday tea, when he would see Laura again, with a curious flutter of excitement. The others would be there of course, and he would have no chance to speak to her alone, but all he wanted was to see her, to be in the same room with her. He was surprised not to find her there when he came in, and sat waiting for her appearance, until Simmons explained she was away,

as one waits for the entrance of the star actress in a play, only to find that an understudy is replacing her. The rest of the afternoon was intolerable, an interminable stretch of boredom and disappointment. He could only think of her, as she should have been, behind the tea-table, her smile of welcome, the gentleness and the beauty of her that he missed. When they came away Vining and Milner began speculating on the cause of her absence.

"Wonder if she's left him?" Milner said. "Shouldn't blame her. Do you think she's run away?"

"Don't be an ass," said Ainger. "Why should she?"

"Why? Wouldn't you run away from old Simmy?"

"I should never have married him. No, she's probably gone to stay with her people."

"I expect that's what *she* says," Vining put in. "Gone to stay with Mother. That's what they all say. She's probably having a bit of fun on her own. What about the Metropole at Brighton? Naughty, naughty! Wonder if Simmy presses the parlourmaid into service while she's gone?"

"Don't be a swine, Vining," Woodley flared out.

As he sat working in the study that evening his thoughts kept returning to her, his eyes roving from his book, staring into the fireplace. His imagination raced forward. Why had she not been there? Had she left Simmy, perhaps? She couldn't love him. He thought of the other afternoon. He had not dared look at her while Simmy was ragging him, but he had felt sympathy radiating from her. Was she unhappy with Simmy? She had never given any sign of it. She couldn't be; she would never have stayed with him so long if she were. Surely you couldn't live with a man for two years and go on hating him? And yet she couldn't love him. Or could she? He didn't know. If she had left him, then he would never see her again. Perhaps she was never coming back. Perhaps she would be away, at any rate until the end of term, and then he would have left.

Would he never see her again? He wanted to, so frightfully; he had not known until this afternoon how much. He could not work; he could only think of her.

The following morning her letter arrived. He read it with amazement, with a flood of surprise and joy surging up in him that caught him by the throat, so that he found himself ridiculously near to tears of happiness that she had written to him. He read the letter over and over again until he knew it by heart; carried it with him all day, pulling it out in class, reading it under cover of his desk, finding his hand straying back to his breast-pocket again and again to feel it there inside his pocket-book, touching it, reassuring himself of the comfort of its existence. He did not bother to wonder why she had written; it was enough that she had done so, that he had this single sheet of paper with her handwriting upon it, belonging to him, addressed to him, with his name written by her, sent to him by her. Even the envelope seemed exciting. He stared at it for a long while, following the strokes her pen must have taken in forming the letters of his name. He weighed every sentence of its brief contents, hugging them to himself, drawing from them a personal sweetness, like a caress, that existed only in his mind. Her voice seemed to rise from the paper, gently, magically, speaking the words.

He visualised her as she must have sat, writing it. He thought of her at her home at Rydal; he could see the little church, and Wordsworth's Seat, and the reeds on the lake. He wanted to be there with her. He dreamed a brief, glorious, idiotic dream of running away and going after her, picturing himself sitting beside her at the water's edge, the wind faintly stirring her hair, the evening twilight falling slowly around them.

Of her father's death, the cause of her visit home, and the sorrow it might mean to her, he could not think. It conveyed nothing to him. He thought of her only as a picture,

a figure of enchantment and loveliness that was the embodiment of his dreams. He did not consider her thoughts, her feelings; he knew too little of her to conceive her as a person, moved by human emotions, capable of human passions. He thought of himself in relation to her in the terms of Shelley's lines, offering "the worship the heart lifts above, and the Heavens reject not." He recited the poem over to himself, swimming in a turbulent flood of adoration and humility, filled with a desire to abase himself utterly before her, to kiss the hem of her garment, to perform all the traditional, symbolic acts of devotion that the heroes of romance performed for their ladies.

And then, one night, he dreamed of her. He dreamed that he was sitting at the table in the Prefects' Room trying to do Cope's arithmetic for him; but the sums would not come right. The answers that he achieved would not agree with those in the back of the book. The denominators of the fractions would not remain the same; they grew larger and larger as he tried to add or multiply; they turned into decimals. He found himself trying to divide $\frac{12}{8} \div \frac{678}{}$ by £3. 10s. 2½d., and tearing his hair in the effort, which resulted into yards, feet and inches. He was doing it for Laura's sake, because she wanted him to, because she was sorry for Cope; if he didn't get it right she would be angry with him, she wouldn't want to speak to him again. And then the door opened and she came in, moving noiselessly. She was dressed in a wide, flowing, medieval silver dress, with a crown of gold and diamonds in her hair, and he thought, "Of course. She's the Armada. What a lovely name." She came and stood beside him, looking down at the sums he was trying to do, and put her arm round his shoulders, her long sleeve falling back, so that the arm was bare.

"You're doing this for me," she said. "I always want to mother the new boys, and be kind to them. It seems such

a pity to make them do sums." He rested his head against her breast, and her arm tightened round him. They remained so for a moment, and then, suddenly, he found himself, he did not know how, standing facing her, and slipped his hand inside the bosom of her dress, which fell apart, like a cloak. Beneath it she was naked, slim and white and graceful like a statue, and he dropped on his knees, his head beneath her bosom, kissing her breasts, while she stroked his hair, his hands seeking wonderingly over her body, until he raised his head to look into her eyes, and she bent and kissed him slowly on the mouth, so that his being seemed to melt into hers. He awoke suddenly. When he slept again the dream had changed, vanished.

All next day it troubled him. When he thought of it he trembled at its remembered sweetness, the ecstasy of her lips on his, the whole quivering passion of the dream, and yet he hated himself for it. It was wrong that he should think of her like that, and yet in the dream it had not seemed wrong. It had seemed a perfect completion of his love for her. Love, yes, that was it; he loved her; he was in love with her. But that was dreadful; she was married, she was Simmy's wife, and he had dared to think of her like that, to think of kissing her, of touching her. What would she say if she knew, if she ever guessed that he had thought of her like that? Oh, but she couldn't; it wasn't possible! But if she did, then she would hate him, think of him, perhaps, as he thought of Vining; see the whole thing as gross, sensual, and disgusting. Was it? It didn't seem so, now. Suddenly all that had ever puzzled him about love, about the relations of men and women, seemed clear. This was what it was, to love a woman, to want her physically, without disgust, without shame, without it being the sordid traffic of the streets. He wanted her. Oh, but that couldn't be; that mustn't be! It was wrong; it couldn't ever

happen. He mustn't let himself think like this about her. Why, why, why had she come like this into his dreams, awakening him to consciousness of desiring her? It was a shameful thing. He didn't desire her; he wouldn't think of her like that. There was a base, loathsome foulness in his mind that made him think of her that way. He would tear the memory from him. But he could not; it persisted, lingering as a sweet, lovely guilty thing, accusing him, tempting him, seducing all his thoughts. He experienced an agony of self-disgust as he lay in bed, thinking of her, torn between his memory of the dream and his belief that it was foul and shameful. He could not answer her letter; always the memory of her, with her dress falling apart, showing her bare body, came before him as he tried to write.

He must not see her again. He must not think of her again. But he could not help himself. She dominated his thoughts. How could he face her, even with the others there, remembering this, with this guilty secret in his heart, that would make her shun him as something leprous and unclean, if she ever dreamed of it? Would it not betray itself? Would she not see it in his face? How could he ever look at her again, look into those eyes that were like clear, still pools? He despised himself utterly.

The week slipped wretchedly by. On the Friday Ainger came into the study.

"Mrs. Simmy's back," he said.

Woodley started.

"How do you know?"

"Met her in the Lane just now. She's asked us to tea to-morrow. You and me."

Woodley was overcome with sudden panic at the thought of seeing her again. He could not go; and yet he must go. He had no reason for refusing. There was a match the following afternoon, but neither he nor Ainger was play-

ing. Could he make it an excuse? Perhaps; and yet he wanted to go, wanted and dreaded to.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said we would. Why? Don't you want to?"

"I don't know. Yes. No. Oh, it doesn't matter."

"Her father's just died," Ainger went on. "That's why she's been away. She told me. She wasn't in mourning, though."

"Oh!" Woodley relapsed into a stupor of numbed, worried misery. Ainger left him, going out of the room and returning about half an hour later.

"I say," he said, "Townley's sprained his ankle."

"Oh! How?"

"Those stairs by the gym. Tripped up and fell. It's a hell of a nuisance. What about the match?"

" 'Strewth, yes."

"I suppose I shall have to play."

"You?"

"Yes. Markby wants me to. I don't know why. You'll have to go to Mrs. Simmy's alone."

Woodley did not answer, but stared at him with a strange, dazed fear looking out of his eyes.

"What's the matter?" said Ainger. "What do you look like that for?"

"Like what?"

"Like that. What's up?"

"Nothing. I say, Ainger, must I go?"

"Where?"

"To Mrs. Simmy's."

"Don't you want to?"

"No. Not alone. What did she ask us for, anyway? You and me, like that, I mean. She never has before."

"I know. I thought it a bit funny, too. I passed her in the Lane; raised my cap, you know—wasn't going to stop—and she spoke to me. Had quite a chat. Asked after you,

and then said wouldn't we come to tea? Just like that."

"Yes, well, I'd better send a note saying we can't."

"There's no reason why you can't."

"I don't want to go alone."

"I thought you liked Mrs. Simmy."

"Yes, I do, but . . ."

"What? Shy?"

"No. Not shy, but . . ."

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know." He turned away impatiently.

"Don't be a young ass. Of course you'll go."

Ainger went out again, and Woodley sat staring at the fireplace, trying to straighten out the tangle in his mind. He wanted to see her. He was afraid to see her. Would Simmons be there? If he were, the afternoon would be unendurable, with himself alone at the mercy of his tongue; if he were not, if he were to be alone with her, what would happen? He felt himself trembling at the thought of her. What would they say? What would they talk about? He had never answered her letter; how would he explain that, for example? He felt he would not be able to look at her. And yet it was absurd. She could not possibly know what was in his thoughts. A week ago he would have had no fear of being alone with her, only a pleasurable anticipation. Why, now, should he dread it; dread it, yet so thrillingly desire it?

He loved her. He was in love with her. It seemed incredible, but it seemed, too, as though all that was romantic in him had suddenly seen fulfilment, as though a window, long obscured and closed, had suddenly been opened, showing him a prospect of all that he had ever dreamed of, lying before him like a stretch of softly wooded country, cool and green and gentle. Yet it was still beyond his reach, still a forbidden land that he might not enter, a gate into Paradise, guarded by the angel of the flaming sword. He

might only stand by the gate and look in longingly, wistfully, and turn away from his desire. If he could only tell her how he loved her, how she had fired in him all his aspiration towards beauty, awakening him to reverence and humility and pride! But that could not be. She must never know. She was another man's wife. She was Simmy's wife; the wife of his house-master, of a man he hated.

And yet she was all beauty. He saw now all the heroines of romance in her likeness: Juliet, Iseult, Francesca. He pulled a Shakespeare from the shelf and began to re-read *Romeo and Juliet,* the balcony scene, translating its emotion into terms of his own, flooded in the tide of its magic, seeing her again as he had seen her in his dream, dark and grave and beautiful, mysterious and romantic, with the shimmering silver of her dress, and the jewels in her hair. He lost himself in that state of exaltation which is the escape from actuality into the realm of fantasy, as though the whole epidermis of consciousness of this world has been removed and the senses and imagination laid tingling to the air. He forgot himself as a boy at school; he forgot her as the wife of authority; for a moment they were removed beyond the confines of reality, of their terrestrial setting, into the sphere ruled only by the imagination, leaping forward at the stimulus of beauty, the beauty of the verse he had been reading, the beauty of his vision of her. The poets' admiration for their ladies, adoring, humble yet desiring, he understood that now, his appreciation heightened by his own experience. He took a sheet of paper, and began to write. He worked all evening on a sonnet to express this idea, this sudden consciousness of the eternity of beauty and of passion to which he had been awakened. It was late when he finished it.

Next morning the vision had faded somewhat, its intensity dimmed, softened, the sharp edge of the moment gone. He read the poem again, seeming to find it, now,

the expression of an idea that he no longer felt, yet could still understand; reading it with an assent, rather than with a participation in its emotion, which, by its very expression, its confinement within the bounds of words and metre, had become a static thing, stored outside himself, where he could inspect it, test it, weigh it, no longer a wrestling, happy torment in his brain. And yet he felt it inadequate; he seemed to have been able to capture so little of that torturing, elusive sense of inspiration; it was as though he had reached out his hands to a pale, lovely company of ghosts, clutching at their garments, and found himself only with a fragment between his fingers, a torn scrap of iridescent tissue that almost mocked, by its tangible embodiment thereof, the frail loveliness of his dream. This was the sonnet:—

I think your face was Helen's. For your sake
The Trojan ruins flame. In anguish dumb
The dying Tristram stares with eyes that ache
Across the lonely waves, to see you come,
Enslaved by your first kiss. And Romeo
Steals through the moonlit garden silently,
To find that subtle smile that well I know,
And you are standing on the balcony.

Oh, lovers all throughout the world have known
Your shadowed beauty, and when poets say
Their love was such, I think I know the way
You held their reason captive. You alone
Have swayed all men through time, in every land.
He loved, and she was fair. I understand.

He made a fair copy of it after lunch, and sat reading it through, again and again. It seemed to him the best thing he had written, better far than anything among the batch of poems he had sent to her during the holidays, the poems

she had not yet been able to return. He wondered if she would do so this afternoon. He wished that he could show her this poem, without telling her, of course, that she had inspired it. He would like her to know, and yet he must not tell her, dared not tell her. He would take it with him. Perhaps he would have a chance to show it to her. Perhaps she would guess that it was she of whom he was writing; and yet, if she guessed, what would she think? Would she not be angry? Oh, but she couldn't guess. . . .

Ainger went off to the match, leaving a note of apology for her, nodding good-bye, and adding "enjoy yourself." Left alone, Woodley sat in the study, waiting for half-past three, the earliest hour at which he could present himself. He dressed with great care, wetting his soft, untidy hair to make it stick down, plastering it back with the brushes. He put on his best suit and took particular care over tying his tie, a black one, since coloured ties were forbidden. At three o'clock he was dressed and ready. He went out. He walked up and down the Lane, impatiently, waiting for half-past, with a growing throb of excitement knocking in his throat. At last the school clock struck the half-hour. He presented himself at the front door.

XI

LAURA had been home three days. She had come back with that deadening sense of return to a hated duty with which the soldier returns from leave, or the schoolboy from the holidays. Simmons had been kindly and considerate, though impatiently contemptuous of her decision to keep the cottage at Rydal, which he regarded as a foolish, sentimental notion and a ridiculous waste of money. She fell back into the routine of her life. Meeting Ainger in the Lane, she had stopped to talk to him, to warm herself at his youth and his unconscious grace, drawing pleasure from his unstudied politeness and charm of manner. Her invitation of him and Woodley to tea the following afternoon was a sudden impulse that she half regretted when she had left him, delaying telling Simmons about it, because it seemed foolish and unnecessary.

This afternoon she sat in her accustomed corner of the chesterfield, reading a novel inattentively. Simmons was at the desk correcting exercises, and emitting grunts of dissatisfaction.

"Oh, dear! . . . Fool! . . . Yes, I thought that would catch him."

She looked up at him steadily for a moment, and then returned to her book. Presently he threw down his pencil, rose, and settled into an armchair with the *Morning Post*.

"Bad papers, Frank?" she asked.

"No worse than usual, I suppose. I've long ceased to expect brilliance, but I do at least hope for intelligence. Vainly, nine times out of ten. They learn the stuff parrot-wise. They never make the least attempt to understand it.

You have only to set a question in ever so slightly unfamiliar a form, and it catches them at once."

Irritation rose in Laura.

"I sometimes wonder," she said, "if men become schoolmasters for the joy of catching boys in exam. papers."

Simmons smiled grimly.

"They well might, if it gives them any pleasure; but it's one that soon palls, I assure you."

She shrugged her shoulders and reached for a cigarette. He looked over his glasses at her.

"Laura, you're smoking far more than you used to, these days, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Yes. It gives me something to do," she said with faint exasperation.

"It doesn't look well."

"Do you mean it doesn't suit me?"

"Oh, don't be facetious. I mean I don't like to see it. It sets a bad example."

"I don't do it outside." Her voice became patiently weary. "I invariably refuse cigarettes at tea with the wives, much as I long for them, for your sake, Frank. I know they all think I'm scandalously young to be a house-master's wife. I must take the first opportunity of telling Mrs. Ratcliffe that I found a grey hair this morning."

Simmons's mind had wandered.

"There's a bad spirit about the place these days," he said broodingly.

"And do you think my smoking fosters it? What do you mean by a bad spirit? Lack of enthusiasm for Algebra?"

"Oh, one can't talk seriously to you!"

"I'm sorry." She turned, repentant. "What is it, Frank? Tell me. You're not looking well. You're worried about something. What is it? Is it still that business you wrote me about—the boy who was expelled? I don't understand

why you took that as you did. Your letter seemed . . . out of proportion to me. I know I don't know much about boys and you . . . should," there was a faintly perceptible hesitation before the last word, "but it seems scarcely possible to me. One or two cases, yes; I understand that. Abnormal or vicious types. . . ."

"It goes deeper than that. You don't realise. Because a boy has a pretty, baby face you think he's all guilelessness and innocence. If you'd spent your life as I have, you'd know what sinks of impurity their minds can be."

She halted a moment before a mental picture of Woodley, risen startlingly before her.

"Well," she said at length, "isn't that the system? I've no brothers, but I've watched since I've been here, and it seems to me a great mistake to cut boys off like that, from their homes, from women, just at the age when they are most sensitive, most curious. It's an impressionable age, and I can't help feeling that perhaps they need a little sympathy and understanding that they can't get from men or from each other."

Simmons was scornful.

"Yes, I know that argument. You get it in the novels that young men write as soon as they're let out into the world. They want to turn a Public School into a sort of zenana."

"And what's your remedy?"

He began lighting his pipe.

"Discipline, and a healthy observance of games, and a proper inculcation of the Public School spirit."

The words reminded her suddenly of the earth falling in little thuds upon her father's coffin. She stubbed out her cigarette with a quick gesture of impatience.

"Frank, can't we get away from here?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"Get away? Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's on top of me. All of it, everything. The other masters, their wives, the selfishness, the littleness, the lack of understanding." She turned to him. "These boys, they're transparent, clear as crystal, and you see them distorted, twisted. You've no feeling for them, save for their respect for you, their conforming to a few stupid forms and ceremonies. You don't think of them as young, developing beings, just coming out into the world, wondering terribly what it's all going to be like, excited, eager, rough and blundering if you like, but honest, decent, happy amongst themselves, left to themselves."

He looked at her in astonishment for a moment, and then laughed.

"Well, really, this is amazing. You, of all people, to talk like that! You, who never go near a school function, who stammer and can't make conversation when I ask the House prefects to tea! What do you know of them? What can you know of them?"

She subsided weakly.

"No, I know. I was imagining, that's all."

"Precisely. Romancing; sentimentalising, instead of facing the problem. As to leaving here, you know my feelings on that point. If I could get a Headship I would leave like a shot. You know I've tried. It's no fault of mine."

"No." She had a weary, desperate vision of all the applications in triplicate, the testimonials and the interviews, ending every time in disappointment. They never would get away. "Besides, it would be the same elsewhere, or worse. I'm afraid I'm not fitted to be a house-master's wife."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I'm going down to watch the cricket. I suppose it's no use asking you to come?"

"I don't think so."

"You should come, Laura." His voice took on a petulant note. "If not for your own sake, then for mine. It

looks bad your staying away from things as you do, as if you took no interest. I get no help even from you. Out of respect for me you might come. A match like to-day's . . ."

"Yes, well, I can't come to-day. I've invited Ainger and Woodley to tea."

"You have? You never told me. What made you ask them?"

"I thought I'd like to. They're nice boys, both of them, and they're friends."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't. That's my province. I don't want the boys in and out of this side of the house at all hours like that. You might use a little discretion. Still I suppose as you have asked them . . . Anyway, I'm not going to stay away from the match for that."

"Oh, but surely, Frank. It'll look so strange."

"That's not my fault. You should have thought of that sooner. Besides, they ought to be watching. You might have known that."

"I didn't think. Anyway they never said so."

"Oh, of course not," he sneered. "Any excuse to shirk their duty to the school, even if it's only coming here to be bored by tea."

"Why should they be bored?"

"Why? Great heavens! Is there anything more boring and depressing in this world than a drawing-room tea-party?"

"Why do you ask them, then, as you do, on Sundays?"

"Because it's expected of me. But you can't pretend it's enjoyable."

"And why not? Whose fault is that? Yours!" Suddenly her anger began to get the better of her, the stored-up resentment of two years unexpectedly breaking through, in spite of her. "Because you're not human. Because you can never get away from the schoolmaster, never forget

your position and your dignity, and that you're talking down to them. Isn't it possible for master and boy to meet and talk on a level, like normal human beings?"

"Not without immediately destroying that relation and all its respect."

"I don't believe it."

"Look at young Campbell. Take him as a case in point. Watch him with the boys. Could you tell by looking at them which was master and which was boy?"

"And that seems to me the essence of a good schoolmaster!" There was a note of defiance in her voice. Simmons laughed. Somehow, now she had said that, she seemed to have turned a corner, seeing a new, straight road ahead. "There are times, Frank, when I can't recognise you, when I can't see the man in you for the schoolmaster, when I look helplessly for the man I married."

He smiled, twistedly.

"Are you hurt because I suggested that Ainger and Woodley would be bored by coming to tea with you?"

"I'm not a child, Frank."

"Well, you're being extremely childish and absurd."

"Oh, very well!" She gave up the attempt. There was a little pause, and then suddenly she turned back to him, as though making a last plea. "Frank, why can't you behave normally and unaffectedly towards them? Why carry the class-room attitude into your ordinary existence? I suppose it's useless for me to talk, but it seems to me so wrong, so unnecessarily wrong, that there should be this barrier between you. A little common humanity is all that's needed."

"Are you proposing to play Blind Man's Buff with them, or Postman's Knock?"

She jumped up with a swift, forbidding gesture of dismissal.

"I'm sorry. I was a fool to talk to you, to expect you to understand. God, if I'd known it would have been like this . . ."

"What then?"

"I never would have come here, never would have married you. You only married me because you wanted someone to play the staff-lady, because a house-master's expected to be a married man, and his wife to enhance his petty little dignity." Her anger was getting too much for her now, twisting her voice, finding expression in tears that she could not check. It was the first time she had ever cried before him, and she hated him now the more that he should see her weakness, despising herself, too, that she could not keep her anger cold, forceful, as she would have liked it to be, instead of destroying her case like this.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Now you're merely getting hysterical and foolish. If you feel like that about it, why *did* you marry me?"

"Because I hadn't seen you at it." She threw it at him.

"At it? What do you mean?"

"Mean?" Her voice broke weakly on a little helpless cry for the futility and uselessness of it all, and then sank back to a calm level. "All that I've been talking about for the last half-hour. Because I thought . . ." She stopped again, unwilling to risk surrender to the tears which she was fighting, made a little weak gesture towards him with her hands and went quickly out of the room, upstairs to her bedroom where she sat staring in front of her, ironically now unable to cry, able only to sit in a hard, parched resentment, for her tears had been tears of anger only, and not of grief.

She heard the front door slam and knew that he had gone out, but continued to sit on at her window, staring at the bright, shouting, joyous green of the trees and the clear, precious, golden liquid sunlight, that were like a pain in

her heart. Presently she heard the front-door bell and remembered Woodley and Ainger, whom she had forgotten as she had forgotten everything but the blank wall of her indignation. She rose, pushing back her hair, and went downstairs to the drawing-room where she found Woodley sitting waiting alone.

He jumped up as she entered.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Didn't you bring Ainger with you?"

"He couldn't come. He's awfully sorry. He sent a note. I've got it here." He felt in his pockets, the wrong pockets, and then handed her the note. She opened it, reading it briefly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But wouldn't you rather be watching the match, since your friend is playing?"

"No. I can see him play any time. Has your . . . Mr. Simmons gone to watch?"

She smiled amusedly, but kindly.

"Yes. My . . . Mr. Simmons has. I ought to have thought of the match when I asked you yesterday. Ainger didn't say anything about it, and I forgot."

"Oh, it's—it's all right."

She sat down, motioning him to a seat.

"You guessed I shouldn't be there, I suppose?"

"Why do you never come, Mrs. Simmons?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'm shy."

"Shy? You?"

"Yes. Why not? I'm awfully shy."

"So am I." The remark came involuntarily. He did not know why he said it.

She nodded gravely.

"I know," she said, quite simply, and then went on: "Besides, I'd hate to come and play the schoolmaster's wife, and be stared at, and wished out of the way. If I come, I should like to come just simply and freely as you do."

"Well, why don't you, then? Besides it wouldn't be like that a bit . . . not with you."

She was surprised at her own pleasure in the implied compliment.

"Oh, thank you," she said, and then there was a silence, a long, slow, difficult silence that he broke, shifting awkwardly in his chair, not looking at her.

"I say," he said, "that letter . . . the one you wrote me. . . ."

She looked quickly away from him, the mention of the letter stirring a guilty memory in her, her heart beating suddenly a little faster.

"What about it?"

"I never answered it."

"I know."

"I hope you didn't think it awfully rude of me. I wanted to answer it, but, well, I didn't know how to. I didn't know what to say."

"That's all right." She was staring at her hands and her long slender fingers with the one plain gold wedding ring upon them. She was wishing she were not alone with him, finding it now so hard to be at ease with him.

"It didn't seem . . . I didn't know . . . I mean . . . I'm most frightfully sorry about your father."

"Yes," so quietly, this, that he hardly heard it.

"Were you . . . were you very fond of him?"

"Yes. I'd seen very little of him since my marriage, though."

My marriage: why did she find a sense of danger in those words, as though she had ventured on a subject which she should not discuss with him? Why should she not mention her marriage? It seemed to her as though the phrase evoked pictures which should not be part of their relationship, admitting an intimacy that was not permissible between them, inviting him to think of her as a person in

a way that he should not do. It was as though some great, slow, cumbrous animal had stirred in a heavy sleep, raising its head, stretching its paws, between them. That was how, for one instant, it seemed to her, and then she dismissed the idea as fanciful and absurd.

"I'd always lived at home with him until then," she went on. "Have you ever lost anyone you loved? I think you said your mother . . ."

"No. I was only about six months when she died. I don't remember her. Did he die suddenly? Your father, I mean? Or had he been ill?"

"No. It was an accident. He never knew. I suppose it's best that way, really . . . for him at any rate."

"It must have been awful for you."

"Yes. It's rather hard to believe he's not still there."

"Do you miss him . . . awfully?"

"I miss the idea of him, if you know what I mean." Why was she talking to him like this? She had spoken to no one else about it. "If we had been together, still living together, or if I'd been in the habit of seeing a lot of him, or writing to him, it would have been worse. But since I came here . . ." She broke off, conscious of venturing on dangerous ground.

"Do you like it here?" he asked, after a pause.

"I?"

She looked at him, almost suspiciously. Why did he ask that? Why didn't he know that that should have been left unspoken, that there were things that must not be said between them? His very honesty, his simplicity was a danger. It was safer to have life ruled off by conventions, reticences. What should she say? She must not tell him that she hated it here, must not reveal her unhappiness, since she had no right to his pity, to his sympathy even, and yet was suddenly aware of desiring it more than anything in this moment; of wanting comfort, comfort from him in the knowl-

edge that he was sorry for her, the comfort that she must not have. She put the idea from her quickly as weak and self-pitying, yet felt that she could not bring herself to conventional lying in the face of his truth, his honesty.

"It's all a little strange," she said. "I don't feel . . . at home here, yet."

"You miss your own home?"

"Yes. Do you understand that? Do you get homesick here?"

"No. Not really. Not any more. But then, you see, that's different. At least, I suppose it is. I mean, I've been at school ever since I was a kid, more or less. I've never really lived at home."

"But you like your home?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. . . . Only I don't suppose it means the same to me that yours did to you."

"What makes you think that?" She looked at him with a curious interest.

"I don't know. . . . I just feel it. Aren't I right?"

"Yes. I suppose you are. But I don't know how you can know."

"Perhaps it's the country. I can understand that that would make a difference. I've never lived in the country, but I feel that if I had I might miss it if I went away. I should think you might feel you belonged to it."

"Yes."

"I've never thought about it before, but I believe I shall miss the country here when I leave. If you'd always lived in the Lakes, as you say, I can understand you must miss it . . . awfully. It's jolly here, but it's not the same. I mean it's got a different sort of feel. I can sort of see you in the Lakes."

She caught her breath in a sudden, quick stab of pleasure that was mingled with fear. There was flattery in his remark, in the fact that he thought of her so, that he should

have thought to visualise her, all the more, perhaps, since she knew that it was unconscious, unintended as flattery. The sweetness of it gave her a strange, secret throb of happiness. Something seemed to stir in her breast.

"It's strange your caring for the country as you do if you've never lived there. I suppose it's because you're a poet." She saw him flush with pleasure and embarrassment. "That sounds funny, doesn't it? Isn't it absurd that there should always be something a little . . . well, a little ridiculous, about a poet?"

"Ridiculous?"

"Yes. To other people. Don't you know what I mean? People are always a little embarrassed by the idea of a poet, even of poetry, almost as though it were something that it wasn't quite good form to talk about."

"Yes, I know."

"I wonder why that is?"

"Well, I suppose it's because it's rather a . . . well, rather an intimate thing, if you know what I mean. One doesn't talk about these things much. You know, like religion."

"Yes."

"I mean, talking about poetry to some people is rather like talking about God."

"Why shouldn't one talk about God?" she asked.

"I don't know. One doesn't though, really."

"Do you believe in God?" Her voice was quietly interested.

"Yes, I . . . I think so." His hesitation was awkwardness, not uncertainty.

"What sort of a God? Oh, I suppose I shouldn't talk like this. It isn't quite decent, is it? Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Not with you."

"Well . . . ?"

"I don't quite know. Not the ordinary sort of God that one was taught about as a kid . . ."

"You mean the old man with a beard?"

"Yes." He smiled wonderingly. "Does everyone think of God like that when they're small?"

"I think they do. God and Father Christmas. That sounds blasphemous, I suppose, but you know what I mean. The two old men, one benevolent and the other terrifying." He nodded. "Were you frightened of God as a child?"

"Yes, horribly."

"But not now any more?"

"No. But then that's because it's not the same."

"Isn't that because you've made Him now what you want Him to be?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, one throws over the child's terror-God because he just isn't possible. Because one can't think of the world as being ruled by a sort of grandfather-schoolmaster with a bad temper. You know, mean and revengeful; always watching with a birch behind his back. And then when you want to put something in his place you put the sort of person you would like. One's God changes as one's ideas change . . . one's ideas of friendship and sympathy. Isn't your God rather the kind of friend you'd like to have?"

He stared at her, wide-eyed, for a moment.

"Yes, I believe you're right. I never thought of that before."

"It's true, I think."

"And you? Is it like that with you?"

She shook her head.

"No. No, I don't think it is." She spoke reflectively. Her voice was like a sad, dark lake.

"What do you mean?" He paused, and then said almost breathlessly, "You don't mean you don't believe in God?"

"I don't know. One hates to say that, somehow. One

hates to make up one's mind . . . too finally." She could not tell him of her loneliness, of the dense, black, endless forest that her life was; could not say that her hope was dying, her hope of friend or lover or God. His youth, his faith, were too fine and too precious for that. She must not hurt them. "One gets . . . lost, at times." Her voice died, broodingly, and then she said quietly, unsmilingly, "How strange it is that we should be talking like this. I don't know why. I don't know how we got here."

"We were talking about your father." He halted before a thought. "Don't you believe you'll see him again? Ever?"

"No. I'm afraid I don't."

"What do you believe happens after death? Don't you believe people go on at all? I mean their . . ."—he baulked at the word "soul"—"well, anything of them. I mean, do you think they just die and that that's all?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"Oh, I don't!" He spoke urgently, his face very earnest. "Surely there's something, something that goes on, the thing that's the real thing in people? I don't know what it is, but the things about them that you like, that make you fond of them. I remember Wells says somewhere, in some book I read of his, that what one likes about people isn't their . . . well, their virtues, if you know what I mean, but just little things about them, the way they look or talk or laugh . . . silly things, but . . ."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, don't you think that's the point? I mean that those things are the real things, sort of stand for what they really are? Oh, I can't explain, but, but don't you think there's something that goes on?"

"I know what you mean. No, I'm afraid I don't. Only in memory. You don't think that anything beautiful you once saw, a beautiful view, or a sunset, or a tree in bloom, you don't think that goes on. It's just something lovely that

you've seen, and that's gone. You remember it, that's all. I can't see why it shouldn't be the same with someone one has loved."

"Oh, but that's dreadful!" There was a curious pain in his eyes, as well as in his voice.

"Is it? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." She saw that she had hurt him, wounded a faith in him. She felt a new responsibility towards him, to cherish his beliefs. "Anyway, what does it matter what I think? Nobody can know for certain."

"Oh, but it matters awfully. I should hate to think like that. I hate you to. You mustn't. Please!" A great wave of tenderness swept over her. She felt herself dangerously near to tears. His pleading was terrible, tearing at her heart. What could she say? This young, vibrant earnestness, troubled for her, was more than she could bear.

"Perhaps I don't, really." She was lying for his sake. She would say anything to see that strained, tragic look leave his eyes. "I don't know. One doesn't know anything for certain . . . thank God!" The last words came from her involuntarily, an echo of the unhappiness that she could not conceal.

The door opened and the maid began to bring in tea. Her entrance was a relief. Laura rose, moving things from a little table for her, thankful for the interruption, yet aware that they must return to their talk, that things had been said that could not be left unresolved, that she could not let him go away, troubled as he was, but must put things right for him. She was conscious of his eyes, wide with a sort of aching, sympathetic pain and longing, watching her as she moved. The maid left the room. She returned to her place behind the tea-table. He sat awkwardly, on the edge of his chair, leaning forward a little, as though uncertain whether he ought not to help her with the tea-things. She busied herself with pouring out, smiling at him,

a little smile of reassurance, as she put the sugar in his cup. She thought his hand trembled a little as he took it from her.

"Help yourself to things, please. Don't wait to be asked."

"Won't you?" He picked up a plate of sandwiches and held it out to her. She took one and laid it on the plate in front of her, rather as though it were a matter of form, without any intention of eating it. She picked up her cup.

"I must give you your poems back before you go. I've kept them far too long as it is, only somehow there's been no opportunity. I've told you that I liked them, though, haven't I?"

"Yes. I'm awfully glad."

"You're very . . . experimental, if you know what I mean. You write as if you were trying to find out something. All poets do, of course. All good poets. The bad ones think they know already."

He considered this for a moment.

"Well, I suppose I am."

"What, exactly? Do you know?"

"Just what everything's about. What it's all for. Oh, I don't think they're very good really. You see, I get hold of something, an idea; I imagine it, because I haven't had much experience, really. One doesn't at school. And then it may be all different. Sometimes I feel I know an awful lot about life, and then something happens and all my ideas get upset, and it isn't anything like I imagined it."

She wondered what he meant by that, what had happened to disturb him. She felt that he was speaking from some recent experience, of something that had troubled him, something that was still troubling him. She thought of his poems, of the curious mixture of sincere and second-hand emotions that she had found there, the ideas he had so obviously struggled to work out for himself, side by side with things that he had lifted, unexperienced, taken

for granted, from other poets, that failed to ring true because they were the expressions of what he thought he ought to feel, passed through an imagination that had no standard of emotional experience by which to test them, only a standard of the senses, the response to colour, rhythm, and the luxurious self-indulgence of imaginary sorrow.

"The best ones are the ones when you are writing about things you know. About the country and friendship."

"You mean the others are rubbish," he said surlily. "The ones I like best probably."

"Which ones are those?"

He hesitated.

"Well, there was one called 'Love Song.' I don't know whether you remember it." She recalled it, a romantic, second-hand version of Shelley's "Lines to an Indian Air."

"Yes," she said gently. "I didn't care for it as much as the others."

"Of course I was awfully young when I wrote it." She looked up at him quickly, repressing a smile. His face was perfectly unconscious, earnest, naïf. She felt a sweet, gentle, amused tenderness towards him. There was a little pause, and then he went on with difficulty, not looking at her.

"There was one I wrote last night. Like that, only . . . better, I think." He stopped.

"Yes?"

He seemed to make a tremendous effort.

"I've got it here, if you'd care to read it."

"Please, won't you read it to me?"

She saw him start a little, as though frightened, with a sharp intake of the breath.

"Yes, if . . . if you would rather."

"Do."

He took a paper from his breast pocket, and looked at it a long time before he spoke.

"It's a sonnet," he said.

"Yes."

There was a very long pause. He put his cup down on the table, looked nervously at the plate on his lap, and shifted his knees a little, so as to balance it there. He smoothed out the paper, pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth. He gave her a quick, pleading look, and then began to read. He read very simply, with almost no expression or intonation in his voice, on a quiet, unemotional monotone that came near robbing the words of meaning. She put down her cup very quietly and sat, not looking at him, staring straight in front of her, while he read.

She heard the first two lines, and then somehow no more. The room was very still. From outside, voices could faintly be heard in the distance. The garden beyond the windows was bright and clear with the spring afternoon sunshine. She heard him pause for a brief moment after the octave of the sonnet, felt him steal a quick, half-frightened look at her, that she did not see, yet knew for what it meant, for all that it held of fear and bravery and longing.

Suddenly, unconsciously, she was aware of what had happened, of the significance of the poem, aware that his heart and his young eager spirit were stirred and troubled, and for her. He went on reading. She scarcely heard the words; she was conscious only of their import, of the romance and magic, true at last for him, that had found their way, pushing stumblingly through the tangle of his dreams, into the light, here before her in his writing, in his voice, and in the sharp sensitive line of his body as he sat reading. Beauty had come to life, had come suddenly into the room as a quiet presence, with grave, dark eyes,

deep and lustrous, moving noiselessly, holding them both in the spell of her enchantment; a radiance, a fragrance.

He finished reading. There was a silence that was an awareness of that presence. Laura dared not move, dared not turn back from this moment of sudden loveliness, sweet and terrible, that she wanted to hold close, close to her heart. Her eyes were wide, and bright with tears that trembled there.

"Woodley," she said, still looking before her, speaking in a voice that was shaken by the same tears, and then turned to him.

"By the way, your name is Roger, isn't it? Do you mind if I call you by it?"

"Please, please do." He spoke so quietly, so earnestly, that the spell was still unbroken, still held them like a dream.

"Well then, Roger," their eyes met for a moment, and then she broke off suddenly. "Oh, but I'm forgetting all about tea. Do help yourself. Let me give you some more. Pass your cup."

He did so. It was over. The moment was broken. They were safe again, alone in the room again, formal, simple, at their ease.

"Did you like the poem?" he asked.

"Yes. Very much." She spoke quite simply, briefly, closing the subject, and then turned the conversation into the impersonal channels of school life. Presently they finished tea. She was aware of constraint as he moved the tray from the little table, was determined that they must not revert to intimacy either of thought or speech, and yet found herself curiously desirous of doing so.

"Will you have a cigarette . . . or . . . I suppose you're not allowed to smoke?" Almost involuntarily she laid her hand on the settee beside her. He came over and sat there.

"No, thanks very much." There was another silence,

heavy with danger. She sought desperately for something to talk about.

"The country's looking lovely now, isn't it?" she said, at last.

"Yes. The hawthorn's ripping, and the trees are wonderful."

"Do you ever go up to Mallow Woods?"

"No. They're out of bounds."

"Oh, yes, of course. I forgot. How annoying. I was thinking of walking over there on Sunday . . . to-morrow. . . . I thought perhaps you . . ."

"Oh, I wouldn't, if I were you," he said rapidly.

She looked surprised.

"Why ever not?"

He hesitated.

"Oh, Sunday . . . I don't think . . . I mean, the townspeople go, and it isn't always . . . well, quite nice." He ended in embarrassment.

"Oh, then I won't," she said simply, afraid to question him further, face to face with another of those blind alleys that were always checking their intimacy. Then the thought of Mallow Woods and the question of bounds recalled another idea to her mind. She had forgotten Cope's visit the day of her departure.

"Tell me," she went on, "I was meaning to ask you. There's a little boy called Cope . . . he's the prefects' fag, isn't he?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"What sort of a boy is he?"

"Oh, just a kid! Why?"

"Well, he came to me the other day . . . with some rather embarrassing questions. I wondered why . . . whether it really was ignorance and curiosity—or whether it was done for a joke."

"What did he want to know?"

"It was about this business of the Riley boy. He wanted to know about that."

"The little . . ." Woodley swallowed a word. "I say, I'm awfully sorry. He ought to have had more sense. But he's awfully innocent."

"You think it really was innocence?"

"Oh, yes, rather." Then an idea struck him. "Unless . . ."

"Unless?"

"Nothing." He dismissed it. "I'm awfully sorry, though."

"It's not your fault. Besides, if it was genuine, it doesn't matter. I thought it was." She remembered something else. "But there's another thing. Do you remember that day I was in the Prefects' Room, and he broke the tea-pot? You said you were going to thrash him for it. Or rather Ainger did."

"Yes."

"And you didn't thrash him?"

"How . . . how do you know?"

"He told me. He said Ainger had told him that I begged him off."

"Oh." He spoke impassively.

"I didn't beg him off. Did I?"

"You said you thought it was a pity."

"And that was why you let him off?"

"I suppose so." Woodley was very uncomfortable.

"You, or Ainger?"

"I don't remember."

"Surely?"

"Well, does it matter?"

"I'd forgotten about it, with all that has come in between. I wanted to ask you at the time. It was very nice of . . . whoever it was that did it."

He dropped his eyes and did not answer. Again she searched for a subject.

"Tell me something about yourself, Roger." She found a

strange thrill of pleasure in using his name. It was as though she touched him. "What are you going to do when you leave school?"

"I shall be going to Cambridge, I think, in October. I'm looking forward to it awfully."

She caught her breath.

"Then this is your last term here? You'll be leaving in July?"

She was aware of a note of anxiety that had crept into her voice against her will. She checked it and said simply "I hadn't realised it."

Their eyes met for a moment.

"Yes. I . . . I'm afraid so." He gulped, and then went on, just a shade too quickly. "And after that my father wants me to go into his business, I think. I'm not very keen."

"What is it?"

"Soap."

"Soap?"

"Yes. Woodley's Wildflowers." He grinned sideways, ashamedly, at her. "Pretty awful, isn't it? Still I dare say it won't be so bad."

"Is there anything you'd rather do?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think I want to write, but I suppose that's just a phase that I'll pass through." There was a pause, and then Laura spoke quietly, as though impelled against her will.

"I'm sorry my husband spoke to you as he did, the other evening, about your writing," she said tonelessly.

"Oh, please! It's quite all right." His voice sounded shocked.

She did not look at him, but went on in the same level tone, driven by some force outside herself to speak as she did.

"I've been wanting to tell you that. It hurt me."

"Oh, it . . . it doesn't matter. I don't think Mr. Simmons quite understands."

"No." She felt a cold, dead anger against Simmons. "He's not very popular, is he?"

"Oh! I . . ." He could not answer her. His honesty was too great.

"You needn't mind telling me." She waited a moment. "Or you needn't tell me. I know he's not. I don't know why I asked."

"I don't think he means it." Woodley was trying to make it better. She turned on him suddenly, her eyes bright with tears, speaking now with a fierce, suppressed intensity.

"Do you wonder that I don't care to go to school functions, when I know how people are feeling towards him, hating him, and me, as his wife, as though, just because I am his wife, I must be like him? Do you wonder that I loathe the place?"

He stared at her.

"Loathe it?"

"Yes. Loathe it. It's all dreadful, hideous, . . . and he . . ." Her voice broke weakly on a little sob.

"I'm so sorry . . . I had no idea." He touched her sleeve. "Don't—don't cry, please."

She took no notice.

"Oh, God, why are things made like that? Why have people no sense, no understanding?" She pulled her handkerchief from her wrist, held it for a moment to her lips, and then turned back to him, smiling apologetically. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to behave like that. Please forgive me. It won't happen again, Roger." She touched his hand lightly, reassuringly, and felt him flinch.

"I wish I could help, do something," he said. "I'd do anything."

She smiled again.

"It's all right. It was foolish of me. I'm all right now."

"And it's not like you think," he went on eagerly. "No one feels like that about you. They all like you awfully. They can't understand . . ." He broke off suddenly.

"How I came to marry Mr. Simmons?" She finished the sentence for him, quietly. "Is that it?"

He rose to his feet, in dreadful embarrassment.

"I must be going," he said.

"Must you really?"

"Yes. I've work to do." He held out his hand. "Good-bye, and—thank you very much."

She accepted it. It was best to let him go.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You must come again soon."

"No." He spoke very hesitatingly. "I think . . . if you don't mind . . . it would be better . . . if I didn't come again."

"Never?" There was a smile in her voice.

"Well, not alone," he said. "Not like this."

She wanted to comfort him.

"You needn't mind what you said, or, rather, didn't say—about Mr. Simmons," she said.

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then? Don't you want to come?"

"Yes. I . . . I want to awfully, but—really, it would be better not."

"But why, Roger?" She could not let him go away like this, unhappy, tormented, self-reproaching. "Why?"

"I mustn't." He moved slightly away from her, hanging his head. "Oh, I oughtn't to tell you. You'll hate me for it." His voice trembled. "You'll never want to see me again—but—I feel awful about it—but—but—well, I'm most terribly in love with you."

There was a silence, and then he raised his head.

"There, now I've said it. Are you furious with me?"

There was a sweet, stabbing pain in her heart. She felt herself suffocating.

"Furious?" she echoed, and then could say no more.

"I meant not to tell you, ever—but I couldn't help it. I'll go now." He moved to the door.

Go? She could not let him go, could not let him go out of the room, wretched, suffering, unhappy because he loved her. She was beyond thought; she knew only that he must not go, that he could not leave her like this, that her one desire was to hold him in her arms, to stroke his hair, to comfort him, to comfort his unhappiness. There was nothing in the world but his unhappiness, the pain and the longing in his eyes, in every line of his body, in his face, that young, lovely, tragic face, that she wanted against her own. Her heart was torn for him, torn with a longing for him which she realised only now at last. Yet she could not speak, could not move.

"Roger," she said, and there was no expression in her voice, "what made you think I'd be furious?"

"Well, aren't you?" He spoke roughly, with his back to her.

"Furious?" Her voice broke helplessly. "Roger . . ."

There was an infinite caress in his name. He turned, very slowly, at the door, and stood looking at her, looking straight into her eyes. She made a little movement with her hands, like the tiniest flutter of a bird, and then was still, staring at him, held suspended in this moment of eternity that seemed to have caught them both. He remained gazing at her, wide-eyed, for a moment, and then came slowly back across the room towards her, his eyes still on hers. She heard a little sob in his throat, saw him press the back of his hand quickly against his mouth, and then he fell on his knees before her, his head in her lap, crying.

"Roger! Roger darling." She stooped, laying her hands on his head, and kissed his hair. He raised his face to hers, a face so tremulous, so pleading that it turned her to water.

Her eyes closed, and he kissed her on the mouth, a kiss so gentle, so utterly without desire, so mingled of reverence and of a love that was only spiritual that it was like the kiss one places on the face of the dead. She pulled his head down against her breast, holding it there.

His lashes were wet with tears.

"Don't, don't cry," she whispered.

He raised his head.

"Oh, I've been feeling so awful about this. I do love you so terribly." His voice was breathless with it. "You're so wonderful. I never dreamed . . ." He pressed her hand to his lips, and then looked up at her face, stained with tears. He touched one of them ever so gently with his finger, removing it from her cheek.

"And you're unhappy. I couldn't bear to see you like that. It was dreadful." Then almost voicelessly he asked, "Why did you marry him? You don't love him." It was a statement rather than a question.

"No." She could say that now.

"Why? Why did you?"

Why? She had forgotten. She could remember nothing, think of nothing but this moment, which was a realisation that she loved him, that she held him in her arms, warm and trembling, close against her.

"I don't know. I was lonely, and . . . Oh, don't speak of him now. Roger, my darling." She buried her lips in his hair.

"All day long I've been telling myself that I wouldn't come this afternoon. I thought I oughtn't to see you again. I thought it was wrong and wicked of me, and that you'd hate me if you knew. You mustn't stay with him, you must leave him, now that you know I love you like this."

Oh, why must he drag her back, back from the moment?

"I can't, Roger. You mustn't think of it. It's impossible."

"You must, Laura." Her name almost stifled him, and, to her, it was as though he laid his hands upon her bare breasts, a sudden shiver of ecstasy. "I love you more than anything in the world. Laura . . ."

"Roger," she breathed. "Kiss me again. Don't speak. Kiss me."

Again he took her in his arms and kissed her, but this time it became a kiss of hunger, in which she joined, fierce, seeking. They held each other a long time, as though aware that it was the last time, that never again could they hold each other so, never again belong to each other. She had forgotten everything. They were in heaven. And suddenly it was shattered by Simmons's voice, coming from behind them. He stood in the window watching them.

XII

HE had been down at the match, watching with a brooding discomfort that nagged and would not let him rest. Although he had received Laura's remarks with a sarcastic calm, suggesting that they were unworthy of consideration, superficially dismissed them as merely hysterical, they went deeper than was compatible with comfort. He was an unhappy man who had bolstered up his mistrust of himself and of everyone around him with a cynical indifference and an affectation of self-satisfaction that was entirely baseless. He knew himself to be a failure, knew it while refusing to admit it. He had had moments when the realisation forced itself upon him, which was one of the reasons why he had given up applying for jobs elsewhere. His pride would not stand the failure, and his pride was almost all that he had left.

Laura's theories about education did not trouble him in the least; he was too sure of his ground for that. The old methods were the only methods. Young men like Campbell, young men with theories, who tried to treat the boys as equals, were hopelessly and completely impossible, dangerous and subversive like Socialists and Bolsheviks. Yes, he could afford to be contemptuous of Laura's remarks on that score. But when she had come down to the personal issue she had punctured his vanity. He was angry with her. He told himself that she was morbid, unhealthy, neurotic, like one of those awful women in that chap Ibsen's plays, always making scenes. No, that wasn't true. She didn't make scenes. This afternoon's was almost the first she had ever made. But he realised now, subconsciously, that it symbolised all she must have been thinking and feeling for the last

two years; realised, too, that he had somehow been aware of it all the time and that he had been resenting it, resenting her. What right had she to feel like that? What right had she to disapprove? She was his wife, wasn't she?

She had said that if she had known she would never have married him. Wouldn't she? Why had she married him? Why had he married her? He had been in love with her; at least he supposed it had been love. He had wanted her, at any rate. She was beautiful, and she had seemed tractable and intelligent. There had been none of this sulking resentment about her when he met her first. Why had she got like that? Perhaps she ought to have had a child. It would have kept her occupied, given her something to think about, instead of sitting brooding all day as she did. Why hadn't she had one? It was a question that he had never been able to bring himself to discuss with her. In a remote, obscure way he would have liked children. He had thought of it when he married her; he had hoped that children would come. He had an idea that she wanted children too. He knew very little about these things, but he had wondered sometimes if she were barren; wondered, too, with a fear that would not let him face it, whether it were possible that he, himself, might be sterile. Now there began to emerge from the back of his consciousness a faint, sneaking suspicion that perhaps, while she wanted children, she did not want his children. He found himself thinking about this, while trying not to, a hundred little disquieting recollections and realisations creeping in on him. He did not bother to ask himself whether she loved him or whether he loved her; that much he took for granted; they were husband and wife. He had found her unresponsive physically, but that had not troubled him. It had never entered his head that women could be passionate, and it would have shocked him if she had been.

He had never considered what she thought of him. But

now, after what she had said this afternoon, and in face of all that she had left unsaid, yet implied, he found doubt growing in his mind, doubt of himself, spreading like damp in a cellar, permeating the artificial warmth of his complacency. He refused to tolerate that doubt, turning it to a sour, spiteful anger against her. She wished she had not married him, did she? Well, if it came to that, then so did he; if she were going to feel like that about it. He hadn't married a woman to have her disapprove of him, sit in judgment on him. What right had she; what right?

For a long time he stood brooding, working up more and more resentment against her, putting himself more and more in the right. He went up to the Pavilion and began to look about him, trying to find someone to talk to, to ease his disquietude in conversation, if possible with one of the boys, his superiority to whom would help to restore his confidence. He always felt better after talking to the boys; it acted like a tonic on him. To his surprise he found Ainger putting on his pads.

"Ah, Ainger," he said. "I didn't expect to find you here. I thought you found social distractions more absorbing than athletics."

Ainger grunted. There was no use in answering Simmy when he talked like that. It only encouraged him.

"And is your young satellite Woodley about?" he went on.

What was he getting at, Ainger wondered. Didn't he know that Mrs. Simmy had asked them both to tea? He probably only wanted an opportunity to let off some inane sarcastic joke he had prepared about it.

"I don't know, sir," he said, finished buckling his pads, and left the Pavilion.

There was no one else to talk to. He wandered round the field, going and standing by boys, preparing something pompous and ironic to say to them; but it seemed as

if they edged away when he came beside them. He told himself that that was only his imagination, but his self-esteem had been injured and he felt uncomfortable and out of place on the field. He must talk to someone. He went up to Ratcliffe, but Mrs. Ratcliffe was with him, and she tried to engage him in a discussion of the catering arrangements in the Pavilion. He left her and moved on. He saw Plunkett standing alone, but they were still not on speaking terms. Blakeney was talking to Campbell, and he was not in the mood for Campbell. But he must talk to someone. He must get his resentment off his chest. The only thing left was to go back home to Laura, who was the cause of it. At least she would be someone to talk to. He had forgotten that Woodley would be there for tea.

But, coming up the path through the shrubbery and the garden, he suddenly began to feel awkward at the idea of facing her again. It was true that he had succeeded in resolving the situation to his own satisfaction, but, even so, the atmosphere had been just sufficiently stormy to leave a sense of unease behind it, and she had said things which, even though he could dismiss them as merely hysterical, were not the sort of things that are easily forgotten. He did not relish the rancour that might still be hanging about the drawing-room. He thought it might be as well to begin, if not by apologising, at least by forgiving her, telling her that he realised she had not meant everything she had said, that she had not been herself when she said it. Then they might have tea and take a little walk before Chapel, and on the walk he could discourse at length, and so get back into harmony with himself. With this resolution he approached the open window.

He stood for a moment transfixed.

"Good God!" he said involuntarily, and then sharply called her name: "Laura!"

The couple on the sofa jumped apart, startled. For a mo-

ment Woodley was the schoolboy again, cowed in the presence of authority. Laura kept her hand on his arm, as if to reassure him. Then Simmons came into the room, master of himself again. He came down until he stood level with the sofa, looking at them, and said:

"Will you have the goodness to explain what this extraordinary conduct means?"

Woodley leaped up, stung by his tone.

"It means I love your wife, anyway," he said angrily.

"Indeed? And you have the face to tell me that?"

Laura rose too. This must not be allowed to turn into a row. She must save their dignities.

"Frank," she began; but Woodley overrode her.

"Yes. Why not? I've told her," he said recklessly, his head thrown up.

Simmons smiled grimly, a smile that covered anger, a terrific anger, such as he had never felt before. But habit was too strong for him; he must still face the situation with the only technique he understood.

"I think you had better remove yourself, my friend," he said, "and the sooner the better. I'll deal with you later."

"No. We must have this out, now." Woodley's voice trembled with resolution.

"Roger! Go, please," Laura pleaded.

"I'm not afraid of him, now." He threw this at Simmons, who went on smiling, smiling while he trembled with rage.

"Indeed? How very interesting!" he said. "Quite a knight-errant, in fact, *sans peur et sans reproche!* And what has made you so brave all of a sudden?" He drew away from the thought that that aroused. "However we'll see about that. You will now go to your study and wait for me there."

"No. I won't go. I'll stay here."

"Roger. I asked you . . ."

He turned back to her, curiously taking command of the situation with a new courage, a new authority.

"I've a right to stay," he said. "I've a right to know what he's going to do."

"You'll learn that soon enough, my friend." Simmons's voice cut in, letting his anger through.

"You think because I'm a boy and you're my housemaster . . . !" Woodley shouted.

"Roger! Please!" Laura's voice broke into the wrangle, which was more than she could bear. It arrested him. He looked back at her. Her eyes were begging him to desist. He subsided.

"Very well," he said simply. "I'll go."

"Thank you." Simmons bowed to him. He took no notice.

"If you want me, Laura . . ." he said. At the name, Simmons almost leaped at him, and then controlled himself, his fingers twitching.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Go now."

He looked at her and went.

There was a long silence while they faced each other. She did not know what was going to happen, what she was going to say; but she was relieved that if there were to be ugliness, recriminations, they would be between the two of them, and not before him.

"Well, this is a charming situation," Simmons said at last. "So this is what it has come to!"

"Yes," she answered quietly. If he were going to be angry like this, it would be easier.

"Yes?" he repeated explosively. "Is that all you have to say? Yes? Don't you realise what this means? Here in my drawing-room! With one of my own boys! . . . And Woodley of all boys!"

"Well?" she said sharply.

"How could you so humiliate yourself? And me, too?"

"Ah!" She smiled a little: now they were getting down to it.

"To cheapen yourself like that! If you had no moral sense to restrain you, I should have thought at least you had more sense of your own dignity, your position."

"My dignity! My position!" She almost wailed it. "I've none. None!"

"Well, mine then. You're my wife. You hold a position of trust and responsibility. That's what you've never realised."

"I'm a human being. That's what you've never realised."

Her anger gratified him. He smiled again.

"Oh, please spare me that cant! You'll be telling me next that you're only flesh and blood, and that you've red blood in your veins."

"Well, so I have. Not . . . not mineral water like you." She hurled it at him, too angry to be ashamed of the sheer temper of it, almost childlike, answering back in the nursery.

"Do you think you can justify your conduct by abusing me?"

Justify? He had understood nothing, had seen nothing, but the slight to his position, had seen them only as master, wife and boy, not as human beings, seeing the externals of the situation only. The realisation checked her anger; yet she wanted to wound him, to stab his pride into a realisation of there being something more than pride involved.

"You don't consider the possibility of my being in love with him?" she asked.

"In love with a boy like that!" he said contemptuously. "Don't be ridiculous. How long has this been going on?"

"Going on? What?"

"This little affair of yours. It accounts for a good deal. I'm beginning to understand quite a lot of things. This is

the meaning of your talk of a woman's influence." He didn't believe that, but he wanted to. He wanted to hurt himself.

"You're wrong, Frank," she answered. "To-day was the first time there has been anything."

He turned away from her with a sneer.

"Why do you bother to lie to me?"

"You don't believe me?"

"I do not." He went to his desk, as if to close the conversation.

"Then you must do the other thing. It's true, all the same."

She picked up her book and went towards the door.

He broke out again, blazing with anger.

"The transparency of it! You ask him here when you know I'm out of the way. You lie to me, tell me you asked Ainger as well, to divert my suspicions." He was piling up evidence to prove what he didn't believe, but was trying to believe.

"I did ask Ainger, as it happens," she said.

"Oh, don't quibble! Yes, you asked him when you knew he couldn't come. Hypocrisy! Ainger was playing in the match, and you knew it perfectly well."

She paused a moment, loth to justify herself, feeling it undignified, cheapening. It was unworthy that she should fight; already it was becoming a squabble, a petty wrangle, vulgar and contemptible. She knew that he did not believe this story, but knew, too, that if she did not disprove it he would grow to believe it. She took the letter from her book.

"Very well, then," she said. "Read that. A note from Ainger. Woodley brought it with him."

She gave it to him. "Now."

He read it slowly, awkwardly.

"H'm . . . Well . . ."

"Well?"

"I apologise," he said, with a sort of twisted courtesy.

"Thank you."

There was another silence, a pause of awkwardness in which he sought somehow to re-establish his position. He did not know what to say. It was impossible to come down to the human issue, to face it simply, directly. He resorted to sarcasm again.

"So this was a mere affair of the moment on which I so unfortunately intruded?"

"Yes."

"And you are in no way ashamed of your behaviour?"

"Ashamed?" Was she? "No. Sorry, perhaps."

He gave a wry smile.

"I'll make *him* sorry," he said. "That young man is going to pay for his amusement."

She was alarmed by the savagery in his voice.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Do? What do you suppose? Do you imagine that I'm going to keep him here, now?" He picked up his cap and gown from the desk. "I shall go straight to the Head; get him expelled."

"Frank! You can't!"

She was frightened now. Woodley was in danger, and the fault was hers. She could see nothing but that. She threw aside pride and dignity, as she threw aside anger and resentment.

"Can't I? Ha!"

"No. You can't." She crossed to him quickly, laying her hand on his arm, catching at the lapel of his coat.

"Frank! Listen! It was my fault . . . utterly."

Now she had said that she knew suddenly that it was true, that there were no excuses to be made for her, that she had no defence and must try to make none. All that remained was to save him. "I led him on," she said. "I made him make love to me. I was a fool, yes, if you like." Her

voice rose dramatically with the intensity of her feeling, inspired by sudden fear for him. "God knows why I did it, but just for a moment I forgot everything—everything. Nothing seemed to matter but the moment."

He smiled at her sourly.

"Ve-ry nice," he said.

"You can't expel him," she went on urgently. "You mustn't. It was my fault, I tell you . . . mine. All of it. You can't make him suffer."

He listened with a malicious pleasure.

"Oh, I dare say!" he said. "I've no doubt you were as much to blame as he. But a boy's not bound to make love to a woman merely because she asks him to; and that woman the wife of his house-master. No. He'll pay for it all right." He made to move to the door, but she held him.

"Frank, I tell you there's been nothing . . . nothing wrong between us. I swear it. I don't know what you imagine, but that kiss that you saw, that was the first, the first time ever. How could he help it when I behaved as I did?"

Was it true? Had she been alone to blame? She did not know, but it seemed so now. She could not wait to analyse her motives, to think of all that had prompted her. She could only see herself, suddenly, as the temptress, as the guilty one who had brought all this destruction about. The spontaneity and the mutuality of the moment, the fierce irresistible interchange of emotion was forgotten. Panic, fear for his sake drove her on to self-condemnation.

"It was mad of me, mad! I know," she said.

"You are beginning to realise it." He nodded almost gloatingly.

"You can't expel him for that. You don't realise what it will mean to him. It'll follow him through life, ruin him."

"And you've betrayed me utterly." He spoke through clenched teeth, melodramatically, in the anger of wounded

pride. "Do you think I shall tolerate that? No, by God! Ruin him indeed? Well, I hope it will. I'll do all I can. I shall go to the Head now. At once." He pulled away from her and went to the door.

Fear suddenly left her, dropping from her like a cloak, revealing beneath it the armour of determination, a sudden resolution to put an end to it now, once and for all.

"Frank!" she said.

"I don't think there's any need to prolong this discussion."

"Wait!" She looked him straight in the eyes, speaking slowly and firmly in an effort to keep melodrama out of her voice. "Frank, if Woodley goes, if you get him expelled, I shall leave you."

He laughed.

"Don't be childish!" he said.

"I mean it." Her tone arrested him, and he stared at her.

"Rubbish!" he said. "You couldn't." He wavered, however.

"I mean it, Frank. It's not been much of a success, our marriage, and you know it. I've tried, God knows I've tried, but this will be the end. If you do this I shall leave you . . . for good. I've thought of it often enough."

"You can't blackmail me into giving way, Laura."

She turned from him impatiently.

"You can call it what you like," she said. "It's true, though."

"You're insane," he persisted. "You don't realise what you're saying. How could you leave me?"

"How? How?" A laugh got tangled up with tears in her throat. "That's almost funny! You haven't realised how near it I've been before, how wretched I've been, what a ghastly mistake our marriage has been. No. You've been too wrapped up in your position, your little dignity, your own self-importance." She turned on him. "Well, think of them now, then. Where will they be, how will you feel, if I leave

you . . . openly . . . as I shall, if you do this? Everyone will know. Don't deceive yourself about that. Where will your position and your authority be then?"

He stood quite still, staring at her, amazed at the bullying note that he had never heard in her voice before. He came away from the door.

"Laura," he said, "what's the meaning of this? Why are you taking this line? The thing's incredible!"

She sat down again, almost unconcerned.

"I tell you, you can choose," she said. "If he goes, I go."

"But . . . but . . . I don't understand this," he stammered. "Are you in love with the boy that you are behaving in this amazing way?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You said that was impossible."

"I should have thought it was," he replied. "But women are unaccountable. Are you?"

Was she? She didn't know. It didn't matter. She knew only that his safety was at stake.

"I don't know," she said. "Yes, perhaps. But never mind that."

"Oh, this is beyond me!" He wandered about the room, shaken, debating the situation, and then turned back to her. "But if . . . if . . . if I do let this go, for your sake . . ."

She allowed this to pass, save for a smile too weary to be contemptuous.

"But how can I?" he went on. "You must realise how impossible the situation is. It will be all over the school. My life won't be worth living. I shall be an object of ridicule."

"And if I leave you?" she said. "What then? An object of pity?" She saw him flinch at that. Ridicule or pity; he could stand neither. His pride again; it was by that that he would judge the situation; it was to that that she must appeal, frighten him by what this would mean to his pride.

And yet, even where she saw her advantage, realising that this was the line that would win her victory, she threw it away as unworthy. She could not fight with those weapons. "But you needn't fear," she reassured him. "Nobody will know. How should they?"

"How? I should have thought it was obvious. Young Woodley isn't going to keep this to himself. His triumph over me; how I caught you and did nothing."

"He won't tell." How was she so sure of that? "I can answer for that."

"And meanwhile I'm to let it continue," he said savagely. "Connive at your carrying on with him, while I sit and play the *mari complaisant?* Is it likely? Humiliate myself like that for a damned, smirking, superior pup of a schoolboy? Not I! Do you think I've no pride? I'll face the talk and scandal, rather." Again he moved to the door, but now less resolutely.

"Frank, listen," she begged him. "If you do nothing to him, I promise I won't see him again." It was her ultimate surrender. "I'll do all I can for you, to play my part better as your wife. I mean it, Frank."

"You seem to forget," he said, weakening again, "that the mischief's done. Am I to see him always, laughing up his sleeve, knowing that he's got the better of me? That I'm afraid to move?"

"If you think of him like that . . ." she began quickly, and then broke off. "Besides, what's the alternative? It's he, or everyone. But I tell you you have nothing to fear. Nobody will know. And it shall never happen again, never. I've learnt my lesson; some things are too dearly bought. And this is his last term here." She tottered a little and then supported herself, her strength fast deserting her. "There you have it, Frank," she said, with the final summary of her case. "If you ruin him, as you want to do, I shall leave you, openly and for ever. Make no mistake about

that. There's nothing to hold me." Her voice rose in a last, whimpering plea. "Oh, it's only your pride that makes you hesitate! But if you'll conquer that I promise you everything shall be all right always. Now you can choose."

Her voice gave out, and she returned to her old corner on the chesterfield, her face averted from him, crying quietly and weakly, at the end of all her strength. She had finished. What happened now was his affair; she could do no more.

"Oh, it's intolerable!" he said.

There was an immense pause, and then, as though from an enormous distance, she heard him ask:

"Laura, I know everything?"

Everything? What did he mean? Everything that was in her heart? Everything that this had meant to her? No. Of that he knew nothing, had understood nothing, or he could not have asked. They were strangers. And this was the man to whom she was married, with whom she had lived for two whole years, with whom, if he yielded now, she would live for the rest of her life. And he could ask that. He had seen them kiss, and had seen it only as a kiss. Of what it had meant to her, of all that had stirred her to it he knew nothing, nor did he guess, nor could he guess, that it had been for her a moment, a supreme moment compact of joy and tragedy that could never come again, a glimpse of all that her life would never hold. And he asked if he knew everything. He was asking as a matter of form merely, and that was how she must answer him, answer as he meant her to answer, answer the question he had asked. She looked back at him, and a smile came palely through her tears, a smile for the futility of their situation.

"Yes," she said faintly. "You know everything."

He nodded, reflectively.

"I shall think it over," he said; and went out again into the garden.

XIII

HALF an hour later the parlourmaid tapped on the door and came in.

"If you please, mum," she said, "young Mr. Woodley is here."

Laura looked up at her, dazed and blank. Her eyes were red with weeping, which she made no attempt to conceal.

"Mr. Woodley?" she echoed.

"Yes, 'm. He says he'd like to see you if you're alone."

Laura continued to stare at her. Her mind was dead. She had not been thinking. She could not think. The name made no impression on her brain. After a few moments the maid said tentatively:

"Will you see Mr. Woodley, mum?"

Consciousness began to stir in her mind again. She had forgotten time, but now she began again to be aware of the room and of herself and her tear-smudged face. She began to try and grapple with the situation, which dimly came back to her as one awakening from a deep sleep gradually becomes conscious of where he is. She could not see him. What could she say to him? He must not see her like this. She must wait, wait until she had thought, until she knew where they stood, what she was going to do. She did not think of him, or of what he would be feeling. Somehow he seemed no longer to have any connection with her. She felt herself isolated, marooned, on a sort of island of space from which she could only call into the silence. She felt that if she spoke he would not hear her voice, as though there were a wall of mist and cloud between them. She could not remember their moment. She could hardly remember him, even.

"No," she said. "Tell him I can't see him." The maid went, returning a few moments later with a message that Mr. Woodley said it was very important.

"I'm sorry," Laura said. "I can't see him. Tell him that, Maud."

Woodley received this message with a blank astonishment that left him, as the door shut in his face, completely bewildered, unable to move. He had left her with a song shrilling in his heart, an air of high adventure played on fifes, to which he marched as though marching joyously to battle, without fear, but with exaltation, finding life suddenly keen with a new thrill, a new possibility, a new promise. He did not know what was going to happen. He did not think. He was beyond the confines of time and space. When he had said that he no longer feared Simmons, it had been true. It was not a boast, but rather a challenge, born of the sudden sense of a new importance in life that had reduced all its normal incidents to insignificance. He no longer saw himself as a boy at school, subject to authority; he had stepped out beyond that, beyond school, and his home and his youth and all material things.

He was in love, and he had dared to tell that love, and he had not been repulsed. There was a new doorway into life through which they would go together. He would not go back to school; he was out of the classroom now for ever, beyond the others, so far beyond them that he felt he could hardly talk to them again as boy to boy. He stood on his own as though on a mountain-top from which he wanted to shout and sing to the world far, far beneath him, filling his lungs with the new, keen air of the height. He had paced up and down the Lane, trembling and afire with this new undreamed-of joy that he did not understand, that had come suddenly to him. She would leave Simmons, how he did not know, but she would not stay with him now. She would leave him and they would go

together, where he did not know, but they would be together, together always. He belonged no more to the past, to anything he had ever known. Life was beginning, a new life, full of such wonder that it pierced his heart, thrilling him with a divine intoxication that was rapture and humility and all amazement. For half an hour he strayed beyond the confines of this earth.

And now she would not see him. He stood there stunned, his whole world of dreams sent suddenly spinning at the blow. What could he do? He must see her, but what could he do? He could not force himself upon her. Why wouldn't she see him? What did it mean? He was face to face with a blank wall. He went back to his study, and sat there staring into the grate, trying to resolve the situation. He did not doubt her. He was too young, too completely buoyed up with the utter trust and simplicity of his youth for that. She loved him as he loved her. That much he knew. But, then, why wouldn't she see him? Had Simmons forbidden it? Was he keeping her a prisoner? His imagination began to work feverishly along these lines. He should not have gone, he should not have left her. Why had she not let him stay? It was his right to stay, to see the thing through. She belonged to him now. What was happening? What was going on there on the other side of the house? If Simmons were ill-treating her, bullying her, making her suffer . . . Oh, why had she married him? How could she have married him? What should he do? Could he go back, force his way in, insist on seeing her, make a scene? What was she thinking? What was she doing? Had she really sent that message that she could not see him, or had Simmons sent it for her? Perhaps she was waiting for him, wondering why he did not come back, not knowing that he had called. Oh, he must see her! He went back again, and received the same message.

"Are you sure?" he asked the maid. "Did Mrs. Simmons

give you that message herself? I think there's some mistake. Would you mind asking her again?"

The maid looked at him with scorn.

"There's no use in my going back," she said. "The mistress says she can't see you. It's no good your plaguing her."

"But I must see her," Woodley said. "I've got to see her."

"I can't help that," the maid replied, "I've got my orders," and shut the door on him, leaving him there helpless, impotent, desperate. Again he went back to the study. Ainger had come in and was reading in the armchair. Woodley nodded at him and picked up a Virgil, burying his nose in it, refusing to speak or to answer questions, yet seeing no word on the printed page before him. After several attempts at conversation Ainger shrugged his shoulders and gave it up. Woodley went on sitting there, devising wild impossible plans, resolving to break his way in, to face Simmons and have it out with him.

Late in the evening, after supper, he tried again. The maid looked at him with interest as she opened the door, and this time she said:

"The mistress will see you now."

His heart gave a joyous leap. It was going to be all right. He did not know what had happened, why she had refused to see him before, but that did not matter now. He followed the maid into the drawing-room.

Laura was sitting alone, nerving herself for this interview. After she had refused to see him the first time she had gone on sitting in a blank, numbed misery that would not let her think. Simmons had come into supper and had sat opposite her in silence throughout the meal, brooding gloomily and eating little. She had made no attempt to speak to him; for the sake of appearances before the maid she had helped herself to food which she had left almost untasted on her plate. When finally he rose from the table Simmons had stood for a moment with his back to her and

said, "By the way, Laura, I . . . er . . . have decided . . . er . . . not to do anything further in that matter for the present. I thought you might care to know," and then had gone off to his study, where he remained for the rest of the evening.

Laura, left alone, was faced with the problem of what she must say to Woodley. She shrank from what the interview would mean to him, from the blow that she must deal him by telling him, as she must tell him, that it was over, that the moment they had had was all that they could ever have, and that they must not meet again. For herself she could face that since she had had no thought of the future, since to her it had been a moment only, unpremeditated, without hope of fulfilment, a sudden yielding to the instinct that had seized her unawares, catching her in the giant grip of passion in which she had been held, without volition, without thought. But for him it had been otherwise. In the moment of their kiss she had known that; when he had said that she must come away with him, that she must leave Simmons for him; and she had seen, then, the danger and the wrong of what she had done.

For one moment now in her desperation and her utter loneliness she regarded the idea, but for a moment only. It was impossible. She could not have his love; to take it would be to rob him of his youth, of all that lay before him of promise and the future. He loved her now, but that would pass. There was the whole of life before him, and, though for herself she saw only blankness ahead, yet she could not steal his happiness for her own. She had hurt him enough as it was. She had opened a door to him which now for ever she must close again.

Yet she knew instinctively that he would fight, batter his head against the brick wall of circumstance. He would refuse to see that it could not be; he would seek to resist with all that swift, headlong urgency of youth that will not

yield to compromise, but demands fulfilment as its right, knowing no law but its own needs, its own insistence on its due. Because he loved her and because unwittingly she had allowed him to believe that there was hope for that love, he could not face its end. Therefore he must not love her. She saw that with a sudden clearness. It seemed to her that while he loved her the frustration of that love would be the frustration of all his life, and that for his own sake he must cease to love her, even though she treasured his love beyond all else in the world. And since his love drew life from the belief that she loved him in return, that, too, she must deny.

Simmons had said that he would do nothing. Woodley was safe, therefore, from expulsion and disgrace; that much at least she had done for him. He must be saved now the prolonged agony of unfulfilment, even though it meant the pain that she knew his disillusion would cost him. It seemed to her better that he should be robbed of his dream suddenly and for ever than that he should watch it die, lingeringly, before his eyes. So for his sake she must do their love the last violence, which was to deny it. In all this she was thinking not of herself but of him. She was willing to deal herself any hurt, so his hurt should be less. She told the maid that she would see him when he called again, and, having reached this resolution, considered it no further, but sat waiting for him, bracing herself to what she must do by repeating to herself her conviction of its necessity.

The door opened and he came in, his face eager and aglow. He waited until the maid had closed the door after him and then moved quickly towards her.

"What has happened?" he asked.

She put up her hand to stop him.

"It's all right," she said. "It will be all right."

"Why wouldn't you see me?" he asked. "I've been so

frightened, waiting all this time. Why wouldn't you see me? Why wouldn't you let me stay?"

"I couldn't," she said. "You must understand that."

"What did he say?" he went on eagerly. "Is he going to divorce you?"

For a moment she was genuinely taken aback.

"Divorce?" she echoed. "In Heaven's name, why should he?"

"Why? When he saw what he did?"

She smiled at him.

"You don't divorce your wife because you find someone kissing her."

"But I love you!" he insisted. "I told him that."

"Even so . . ."

He stared at her, perplexed.

"I don't understand," he said. "What did you mean when you said it would be all right?"

"Why, that he's not going to do anything," she answered.

"You call that all right?"

"You don't understand me. I was thinking of you. It will go no further."

"But . . . but . . . I wasn't thinking of myself," he stammered. "That doesn't matter now. It's you, Laura, you." Again she trembled at her name from him, more poignant than ever now. "You can't stay with him feeling about him as you do . . . after that . . . after he saw . . . after I told him. He must divorce you. I don't know how these things are done, but surely when people find that things are like that they don't stay together."

She looked at him longingly. This was going to be worse even than she had thought. Her heart went sick within her.

"Roger, come and sit down. I want to talk to you."

She went back to the chesterfield where he was about to follow. She stopped him with a tiny gesture of her hand,

and motioned to the chair that faced it at right angles.

"No. Over there," she said.

He took the chair wonderingly, staring at her with a puzzled hurt in his eyes. She drew herself up and spoke, not looking at him directly but slightly to the side of him.

"Roger, I don't know what you thought," she said, "but obviously this can go no further."

"Why? I don't understand."

"You yourself said it would be better for you not to come again."

He looked stupefied.

"Yes. But that was before . . . before I . . . it was because I was afraid . . . I was afraid to tell you what I felt. I thought you would hate me if you knew. I never dreamed that there was any chance. But now, now . . ."

"Nothing has changed, Roger," she said.

"Nothing? But everything has changed." He leaned forward and dropped his voice to a piteous pleading. "You let me tell you . . . let me kiss you. You know I love you. You love me too. Why, why do you say nothing has changed?"

She took command of herself, smothering her turmoil of emotion, forcing herself to speak calmly and deliberately.

"Roger, listen to me," she said. "It's hard for me to explain, but you're taking all this too seriously." His eyes were a reproach that she avoided. "It was wrong of me, I know, to behave as I did—to let you kiss me—but . . . but I was sorry for you and . . . I just didn't think." She summoned all her firmness into her voice, delivering sentence on herself and him. "But that's all there is to it. It means no more than that."

In the silence that followed it seemed as though both their hearts had stopped beating. He had been staring in front of him while she finished and now he turned back to her, very pale and tense, the nerves of his mouth twitching.

"You mean . . . you don't love me?" he said, and then gave her a dreadful, piteous little smile. "You were only . . . playing with me?"

She was silent, her eyes lowered. The smile faded and he rose very quietly.

"Very well," he said, "then I'll go," and moved to the door. She mastered herself quickly. It must not end like this.

"Wait!" She stopped him. "I haven't finished."

He stood with his back to her.

"What is it?" he asked roughly. "What do you want?"

"I want you to come and sit down again and listen to me quietly," and then, when he did not move, she added, "please."

He returned to his chair, sitting on the edge of it as though prepared for flight, his head turned away from her, his hands clenched.

"Well?" he said.

She went on with what she had to say, talking quietly and simply, dealing her blows efficiently, trying to bring kindness into her voice and yet not weaken.

"You must forget all this," she told him. "I've been to blame, I know. I let you think I meant all sorts of things. I wanted you to think so. But now, as I say, it's over. You must be sensible and forget it. It won't be very difficult. There'll be your work and your games. You've been neglecting them. You've been getting too sentimental." A shudder ran through him, but he did not speak. She saw it and held on to herself, forcing now a note of brightness that was almost hysteria. "And then you'll be leaving," she went on. "There'll be Cambridge and new interests. Soon you'll be able to laugh at it." She tried to laugh herself, but the laugh trembled and deserted her. She blinked away tears. "You blame me now. You think I've made a fool of you."

"I've made a fool of myself," he muttered.

"No, Roger," her heart went out to him, yearning for him, but she forced herself back to her speech, fighting the pity that tore her. "Besides, you'll get over that. You'll look on this differently in time. You'll hear no more of it, if you'll be sensible. I can promise you that. You needn't fear."

"As if that mattered now!" His scorn broke through her pretence. "As if I cared about that! Did you think that was why I came back? But I'm sorry. I see I made a mistake." He made an awful attempt at sarcasm. "Thank you for . . . interceding with Mr. Simmons for me. But don't you think he'd rather be rid of me?" She could not endure this. In a moment she would give way, tell him the truth, take him in her arms again.

"Roger! Please don't take it like that," she begged.

Her voice was a torment to him. He rose suddenly.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

She shook her head, unable to go on.

"Then I'll go."

Again he went to the door, and then stopped at a thought.

"Oh!" he said. "Might I have my poems back?"

She stared at him with a sort of fascinated helplessness, a sickening wave of recollection sweeping suddenly across her at the thought of his poems and his letters and their meetings. Then she checked herself.

"Of course," she said simply. "I forgot. I'll give them to you."

He watched her unlock a drawer in her desk and find them easily among the order therein. She gave them to him without meeting his eyes, and then turned away to the fireplace. The poems were still in the envelope that bore her name in his handwriting. He pulled them out and looked at them and then at her, as she stood staring at the hearth, waiting for him to go. A sudden, blind, destructive anger took him by the throat and he tore the poems

savagely across, flinging the pieces on the floor. She turned, startled at his violence.

"Why do you do that?" she gasped.

"I've been getting too sentimental," he said, with a sudden desire to wound her, throwing it at her as an insult. "Good-bye."

He turned and went swiftly out of the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving her standing staring after him with her hand raised to her face as though he had struck her. She felt as though she never would move again.

XIV

HE returned mechanically to the study, not yet thinking, pushing the memory of their scene to the back of his mind, refusing to face it until he could find solitude to reflect. But it was nowhere to be found. Ainger was still in the study, working at the table. He looked up as Woodley came in.

"Hullo!" he said. "Where have you been?"

"Nowhere."

He picked up his book again.

"You've been a damned long time on that Virgil," Ainger said brightly.

"Have I?"

"It's only twenty lines to do. You can't be reading it for fun."

"No? Well, it's my business, isn't it?" he snapped in reply.

Ainger looked at him in surprise.

"I say! What's the matter with you?"

"Matter? Nothing. Why?"

"Well, you're looking a bit old-fashioned like."

"Oh!"

Woodley relapsed into his book, raising it between them as a barrier to further conversation. When Ainger persisted, he said, "Shut up! I'm trying to work." But he could not work; nor could he think. He felt sick and trembling with the sense of humiliation that he dared not face. Laura's words lay dead in his mind, which shied away from them, shelving realisation. He could not sit still. He got up and went out of the room, but there was nowhere to go, no-

where where he could be alone. He went down to the Prefects' Room which was deserted. Outside, the evening was fading to twilight, a damp mist rising from the fields beyond the window. He sat alone at the table in the gathering darkness, trying to think. But thought would not work coherently. He could only remember her face, set and expressionless, and a few isolated words that she had said.

Sitting there listening to her in the drawing-room, it had seemed as though a sudden chillness had fallen on the room, as though a great hand had seized his heart in a firm, icy grip. From the moment he had seen where she was tending, before she had ever said those words that now could never be unsaid, he had wanted to escape. His only thought had been to get out of the room before he broke down, to get away before the tears that he felt rising in him broke through his defences and shamed him utterly before her. That was why he had gone to the door, and she had dragged him back while she went on talking, saying words that he hardly heard, since everything in him was strained to master himself, so that he could sit there and appear to listen, so that she should not know what she had done to him.

And then suddenly those tears had turned to anger in him, the anger of self-pity, which was why he had made that last, violent gesture of melodrama, tearing his poems, to inflict a wound on her, and, through her, on himself.

But now he no longer wanted to cry. He was beyond that. He felt only shame and humiliation for the fool he had made of himself, for the loss of a dream that he had been a fool ever to have dreamed. She had been playing with him, flirting with him, and he had taken it seriously. He had thought himself so fine and manly; he had thought that he had come to man's estate, and he had been a poor, sentimental idiot of a schoolboy, duped by the oldest trick in the world. "You've been getting too sentimental." She

had said that. She had said that; and now he could hear nothing else.

His memory repeated it to him again and again, making no impression on his mind, but driving it deeper and deeper into his heart. He felt sick with self-contempt and shame for the difference between the exaltation of three short hours ago and the sheer abasement in which he now saw himself. He did not spare himself. He sank into an abyss of misery. It was over; everything was over. What was there left for him? He felt he had come to the end of life, to the end of hope. Nothing mattered now. His dreams had gone, and there was nothing left.

But she—how could she have done this? Had she been acting all the time, acting her unhappiness to ensnare him, to turn on him now and dismiss him? He hated her. He wanted to hurt her, to hurt her as she had hurt him. What could he do? He thought of suicide. If he should kill himself would she be sorry? He gave rein to his imagination in the luxurious picturing of his own death and Laura's grief and remorse. Should he leave a note? He began to compose it, and, in doing so, to feel better. But this phase did not last long. His hurt was too deep for that. He knew that he would not kill himself, knew that it was only a protective refuge of the imagination to save his pride. He threw it away. He had no pride. It had been trampled down, killed before his eyes.

He faced reality again. There were two more months of term to be lived out, with the knowledge of his humiliation ever present. He thought of her and Simmons, aware of it, laughing at him perhaps. How could he face that? How could he go back to his work and his games and his life among the others, with this experience that had altered all his standards for himself? He could never be the same again. Nothing could ever be the same again. The future

was blank, empty beyond thought; an eternity of desolation and self-contempt.

He put his head on his arms and began to cry, but tears brought no relief, for they were tears of self-pity that only dragged him lower in his own estimation. The chill, dark melancholy of the room and the silence of the stone corridors outside weighed down upon him. The school had become a prison; its order and its quiet, as well as its life and its activity, would be intolerable from now on. He thought of running away. But where? He could not go home, suddenly, like this, in the middle of term. They would send him back. Where could he go? He had no money. There was nowhere for him to go. He was shut in with his own misery, alone with his own heart which he despised, imprisoned with himself, who was now the most contemptible thing on earth.

When at last he dragged himself from the room and went to bed the night brought him no comfort. Sleep came to him, but with it came dreams. He dreamed of her; dreamed that she came to him, sweet and gentle as he had thought her to be, and made explanation, he did not know what, but explanations that comforted him, that put everything right again, that they kissed and were happy, that all this wretchedness had been a misunderstanding, wiped out now by her kiss. He awoke feeling comforted, and then remembered reality: that he had not seen her, that their last meeting was what it had been and their last words words of cold cruelty. He rose in the morning, jaded and unrefreshed, with the sick misery like a weight in his heart. He hardly spoke to the others, and was grateful for Chapel as a refuge where at least he need not talk. He did not hear the service; his whole consciousness was averted from apprehension, centred only on sensation, his mind functioning merely as an aching organism that was conscious of

nothing but its own ache. The morning dragged itself out, and the midday dinner was an unendurable meal at which he could not eat. His throat was closed and dry. He pushed his plate from him and sat staring at the torn, stained tablecloth, doggedly silent. Afterwards, to avoid the others, he set off for a walk alone.

It was a perfect afternoon of May, and the country was bright with spring. There was a profusion of blossom on the trees and hedges; in the little gardens of the quiet streets lilac and laburnum were in flower. The town was very empty, with a few children hurrying to Sunday school, a few maids setting forth on their afternoon out, here and there men waiting for them at corners. Everything wore a neat, happy, almost self-conscious air of orderliness and Sunday best. He walked quickly, not thinking of where he was going, but anxious to get away beyond the confines of the town and to outstrip the other boys who, he guessed, would be following in twos and threes for their Sunday afternoon stroll. They would probably be making for the river, and he struck off, therefore, in the opposite direction, climbing the hill of the Mallow Road, where the chestnuts stood, large and full and spreading, with their proud candles, red and white, among the green richness of their leaves.

He stood a little while by a gate, looking across a field of long rough grass and buttercups, sloping gently upwards in the distance to an old tumble-down farmhouse and a little wood, where brambles grew and late violets and wood-anemones. In the field were two great trees, sturdy and immense, standing in a tall magnificence like kindly giants, watchers of the quiet English countryside. The whole scene was breathing as though in a deep sleep of peace, an age-long serenity that stretched back unbroken three hundred years and more, through which men had loved these fields and seen these trees standing as they stood now, as he saw

them now in his unhappiness. And the men had passed with their lives and their sorrows, and the countryside remained, unchanged, new-born to this peaceful beauty every spring. It was a scene for tranquillity, for a mood of gentle happiness that could harmonise with its serenity, but it filled Woodley with an even intenser melancholy than before, heightening his wretchedness with its untroubled stillness, which seemed strangely to remind him of all that he had lost, its loveliness suggesting too poignantly the vanished beauty of his dream. He breathed her name as he leaned on the gate, "Laura, Laura," and again dropped his head upon his arms. All this was too beautiful; beauty was an illusion, a lying dream that he had been fool enough to believe in, only to be betrayed, to have it turned to ashes in his hand. He straightened himself up, staring at the landscape with eyes that were full of hatred. It was unendurable; his misery was so intolerable that he could not bear to gaze on beauty. He turned away from it and stood in the road, a figure of sheer dejection, lost in a stupor of unhappiness.

Presently he started down again towards the town, walking listlessly, without direction. As he turned a corner a woman's voice said, "Good afternoon." It was the red-haired girl from Crawley's. He stopped involuntarily.

"Going for a walk?" she asked.

He nodded, feeling himself flushing.

"Nice afternoon, isn't it?" she went on. "You all alone?"

He nodded again, staring at her. A breath of cheap perfume came towards him, startling him with a sense of physical intimacy.

"What are you staring at?" she asked. "Anything wrong with me?"

"No. No, of course not. I'm sorry."

He looked away, awkwardly, yet did not move.

"That's all right," she said, "I like it," and gave a common little laugh, which reminded him suddenly of the

woman with whom he had danced at the "Siren," bringing back the same sense of repulsion, mingled with desire. He realised now that he had always thought of this girl like that, subconsciously, that the dislike he had always felt was based on fear, the fear of attraction. She was talking again.

"Going anywhere special?" she asked.

"No. I don't think so."

"Want company?"

He shook his head without thinking.

"That's polite," she said, with a laugh. "Just when I was going to say I might come along with you if you was to ask me. What about it?"

Seeing him hesitate, she slipped her arm through his.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go up to Mallow Woods."

"They're out of bounds," he answered.

"No?" She stared in mock wonder. "All the better, then. Nobody else about."

He looked at her, curiously fascinated, not by her, but by her remark. That was what Vining had said, and he had hated him for it. Yes, but he had been a fool then, full of ideals, ideals about women. Ideals? Lies, that's what they were, bloody lies. Vining had been right. You were a fool to have illusions about a woman. He had proved that now for himself. Women were what Vining had always said they were. And here was this girl inviting him to prove it. Should he go with her? Why not? It was forbidden to walk out with townees, just as it was forbidden to go into Mallow Woods. Yes; but what of it? If he were discovered he might be expelled. Well, all the better then. He wished that they would expel him. Then it would be over, and he wouldn't have to stay and drag out the rest of the term. Anyway, it didn't matter what happened to him now. Nothing mattered. What would happen if he were to go with her? What would she do? What would he do?

He didn't know, but that didn't matter either. Nothing mattered.

"All right," he said at last, and turned back again up the hill, with her walking by his side. He wondered if anybody would see them, and rather hoped they would. He shouldered the adventure in a spirit of bravado. As they walked she talked to him, though he barely heard what she said. Her voice was vulgar, but somehow now he relished that; it fitted with his mood, an added lowering of himself that he enjoyed. He wanted to hurt himself as deeply as he could, to stamp on and destroy every relic of all that he had once held decent.

Presently they turned off from the road and went into the woods, which were still and very silent, with the sunlight falling in pools and patches through the trees. After a while she stopped and sat down on a bank, motioning him beside her.

"It's nice here, isn't it?" she said. "Quite a long way from the road."

He felt his heart suddenly beating faster.

"Got a cigarette for me?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No, I'm sorry," he said. "I don't smoke."

"Oh, well, never mind." She leaned back on her elbow, watching him.

There was silence for a minute. He was sitting, turned away from her, with his cap pulled down over his eyes.

"What are you sitting like that for?" she asked. He felt her hand slip through his arm and touch his hand.

"Don't you like me?" she said. "I like you." She pulled him round, facing her. "I've always liked you . . . when you came to the shop . . . I like you . . . you're nice."

He hung his head.

"You're shy, aren't you? You needn't be."

She took his face in her hands, smiled at him, and then

leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. He tried to pull away from her, but she held him, keeping her mouth pressed against his.

Her lips were soft and moist and greedy. Slowly his resistance left him. His reluctance died. Desire awakened in him. He found himself kissing her in return. Her eyes closed and she took his hands in hers, laying them on her breasts where she pressed them, clasped in her own. The physical warmth of her communicated itself to him. He forgot his repulsion, forgot the desperate, almost suicidal spirit in which he had begun this thing, forgot everything but the bodily sense of her. It seemed as though she were draining him of memory and of thought, drawing from him everything but his passion, which took fire from hers. And then suddenly she released his hands and threw her arms around him, pulling him to her, dragging him down with her on the bank.

"Darling," she whispered hotly. "Darling. You're nice . . . so nice . . . kiss me . . . kiss me again . . . darling."

And now he seized her in his arms, fiercely this time, pushing his face against hers, blindly, like an animal. All the hot, stifling dreams that had ever come to him, that he had ever sought to thrust away from him, as he had done that night when he had lain awake thinking of the woman at the night club, imagining all that he could have done with her, came suddenly to life, flashed real and burning in front of him. This was the reality at last, here before him. There was no turning back. He did not want to turn back. He was seized with a brutality, a dreadful, tearing desire to lose himself, to degrade himself utterly, that he could never have believed to be part of his nature. His hands were clawing at her dress. He was being drawn down, deeper and deeper, into a vortex of sheer animal excitement. The world receded, left him. He forgot everything but his body.

XV

AFTERWARDS, she had clung to him, but he had pulled away from her, overtaken by a wave of shame and self-disgust.

"Don't! Don't touch me!" he said, not looking at her, sitting hunched up, staring at the ground.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Don't you like me? Don't be silly."

She crept up behind him, on her knees, and put her arms around his neck, sliding her cheek against his. He shuddered and wrenched himself free, pushing her from him so violently that she fell, sprawling on the bank.

"Don't!" he repeated. "Please! Leave me alone!"

"Here! What's up?" She raised herself, caught his arm and pulled him round, facing her. For a moment there was black hatred in his eyes, and then he hung his head. She laughed shrilly.

"Silly boy," she said. "Cheer up! What do you want to feel like that about it for? Was it the first time? Well, it won't be the last, I'll bet. You're nice. I like you."

Again she took his face in her hands and sought to raise his head. He kept it lowered.

"Kiss me," she said, and now her voice, warm and sticky, revolted him.

"Don't!" he said again. "Leave me alone. You make me sick."

She released him suddenly.

"Sick?" she echoed. "You? I make you sick? You little ——" She hurled a name at him. There was a pause while she drew her breath and then she proceeded to abuse him, spattering him with filth, releasing a torrent of foul lan-

guage that seemed to cover him with dirt from head to foot.

It terrified him. He could never have imagined anything like it. She had ceased to be human; it was as though mud had come to life. Her voice was like a great inflamed sore. He could not speak, could not stop her talking. He could only sit and stare at her, scarcely hearing what she said, beyond knowing that it was hideous, and that it was directed at him. The foulness of it deafened him. He sat cowering under it until he could bear it no longer, and then scrambled to his feet and ran, ran as though he were running for his life, anywhere, stumbling over roots and fallen branches, anywhere out of earshot of the voice that shouted after him.

He ran a long way blindly until at last he fell, panting, against a tree that stopped his progress. He leaned against it, trembling, his knees shaking under him, his face on his arm against the trunk, and remained there. Presently he raised his head. The woods were quiet; he could see no one, hear nothing but the birds overhead. He looked at his watch. It was half-past four. He ought to be getting back. He had lost his direction; he did not know where he was. He was afraid to move, terrified lest he should meet her suddenly, crouching somewhere, in his path. He stood waiting. Nothing was to be seen; he could hear only the gasps of his own breathing and the thudding of his heart, somewhere in his throat. He was shaking all over. He could not stop himself. After a little while he heard voices somewhere, indistinct in the distance. He did not know whether they were in the woods or on the road. If they were in the woods then their owners might find him. He must not be found there. He had forgotten now that he wanted to be caught, caught and expelled, and began to run again, without direction, tripping and stumbling, pausing now and then momentarily for breath, pushing aside bushes and

brambles with his hands. Once he fell, full length on the ground, but he picked himself up, dusted his clothes and ran on, half sobbing now, growing more desperate as he ran. At last, without knowing how he got there, he reached the road. He was about two miles from the school. He looked fearfully over his shoulder in case she should be following, but there was no one in sight. He jumped the intervening ditch and landed on the road. Even there he could not fall into a steady pace, but broke every now and then into a run, overtaken by sudden fear, running to escape from the horror he had left behind.

As he turned a corner where the road went downhill to the town he saw two boys ahead of him. They were members of the Sixth who, when they heard him coming, turned and waited for him to catch up with them.

"Hullo!" said one of them. "Where have you been?"

"I say, you're in a mess," said the other. "What *have* you been doing? Look at your clothes."

"I fell down," he answered.

"Where?"

He spoke without thinking.

"In the woods," he said.

"In the ——? Well, you *are* going it! What have you been doing there? And where's your lady friend? Did you leave her behind? Or were you birdnesting?"

"I should clean myself up, if I were you, before going back. You can't go in like that. Look at you. You're all over stuff. You look as if you'd been having a proper rough-and-tumble. Here, stand still and let me get some of it off you. And pull your tie straight. Fell over, my foot!"

Between them they beat the grass and mud off his clothes, while he stood dazed between them.

"Where's your cap?" asked one.

He had not noticed that he was without it.

"I don't know. I suppose I've lost it."

"Left it in the woods? Aren't you careless! Has it got your name in it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. What's it matter?"

"Well, supposing somebody finds it. Bit of a give-away, isn't it?"

He had not thought of that. Where had he dropped it? He could not remember whether he had had it on when he left her. Should he go back and hunt for it? He would never be able to retrace his steps. Besides, he couldn't go back; he couldn't face those woods again. The very thought of them made him shudder. But supposing the cap were found? Supposing the girl had picked it up and sent it to the Head, saying she had found it in the woods? Well, he would have to risk that. He couldn't go back. He couldn't.

The other two were looking at him curiously.

"What have you been doing?" persisted the first. "Tell us."

"Have you really been sporting with Amaryllis in the shade?" questioned the other.

He tried to force a note of jocularity.

"What do you think?" he said.

"You weren't really in the woods at all, were you?"

They kept up a flow of intrigued questioning and banter for a while, and then dropped the subject. The three of them walked back to school together. Their presence was a protection, a protection against thought, against remembrance. He wanted to forget what had happened; he knew that he never could forget, but while he was with them he need not think of it. He could not bear to think of it, not yet awhile.

But as soon as they had left him it surged in on him again with a hot wave of loathing, every detail coming back sharply before him. Was it possible, was it true that it had

really happened, and to him? He stared at himself in the mirror of his dressing-table as though he expected to find himself changed, to see the marks of his experience in his face. But he looked just the same. He could not believe his memory, and yet he could not push it from him. He felt soiled beyond belief. His face was hot and burning, and a sick sensation was constricting his heart. His hands seemed to smell of the cheap sweet perfume that she used, and not only his hands but all of him; and of some other odour, subtler than that, as though the physical odour of her body still clung to him, permeating his clothes, penetrating him.

He went into the bathroom, stripped and took a shower, changed every stitch of clothing he had on. But it seemed to make no difference; the sense of physical contamination still remained. It persisted all that evening, sickening him, as he sat over his preparation for Monday morning, working somehow blindly and mechanically at an essay on "Palmerston," translating with a dictionary the meek sorrows of "Eugenie Grandet," driving incomprehensible pages of Trigonometry into his brain. He forced back his memory of the afternoon until it lingered only as a sense of uncleanness, catching him if he paused a moment in his work, festering below the level of his concentration.

But in bed that night it recurred in all its horror, magnified, as he lay in the dark. Loathing and sickness and fear descended on him in full force. He thought of disease, of all that he had ever heard or read of the dangers of sexual intercourse, and grew panic-stricken, imagining himself infected. He could not lie still, but turned and twisted in his bed, as the thoughts turned and twisted in his mind. If for one moment he succeeded in banishing the memory of that afternoon, he remembered his earlier misery and humiliation. But he could not think of Laura now; he had degraded himself too far. Well, perhaps it was better so. There was nothing left now, anyway; no further degradation to

face. He had come to the end of everything. He wished that he could die, and thought of suicide now in earnest, no longer as a gesture, but as a relief, a way out from this intolerable shame and fear and self-disgust. He wished that he could kill himself and have done with it all. He knew that he could not.

If she knew this, if Laura knew what he had done—his mind sheered away from the idea. She couldn't know. She couldn't know that such horror existed. Horror: yes, that was it; horror, as he had always known that it would be, even while it had seemed attractive and desirable. How could he have done it? What vile thing in him had driven him so to degrade his body, and not only his body, but himself, all of him? He had defiled himself, through and through. He would never be clean again.

So he lay all night, not sleeping, tortured by disgust and fear, alternating in their ascendancy, falling into fitful dozings of fatigue, waking from them suddenly in a cold sweat of terror, dragging the bedclothes over his head in an effort to shut out reality, and then throwing them back, half stifled, and lying staring at the ceiling with wide hot eyes of agony.

His head was feverish and throbbing as he went into class next morning. His day started with a double period of Maths.; an hour of Trigonometry, and an hour of Algebra. It was the first time that he had seen Simmons since their encounter in the drawing-room on Saturday. He looked at him covertly as he entered and for one brief second their eyes met, and then each hastily averted his gaze. During the whole of the two hours that followed Simmons affected to be unconscious of him, deliberately looking to either side of him when he addressed the class, behaving almost as though it were a ghost that was occupying Woodley's desk, a ghost that he would not admit was there.

The others soon became aware that there was something

wrong. As a rule Woodley was Simmy's favourite butt; they could not help noticing that never once this morning did he address him, any more than they could help noticing that his temper was unusually short, and his patience, never at the best of times very stout, almost threadbare. Yet his manner was unaccompanied by his usual gusto; he was irritable and impatient; he did not indulge in his customary flavorous sarcasm. He seemed for once not to enjoy their mistakes and their slow-wittedness, but to be genuinely annoyed by them. He appeared to be watching them, as though suspicious of them; he did not take his eyes off them as they filed out at the end of the period. He seemed to be straining to catch what they said. In the luncheon hour he was moodily patrolling the locker-passages, hanging about near the Prefects' Room. Yet he did not speak to them, only grunted at them, and paced up and down with his hands clasped underneath his gown.

"What's it all about?" Milner asked, as they sat over tea, at which Woodley had not yet put in an appearance. "He's in the hell of a rage about something. Look at the way he flared up this morning because I hadn't got my protractor. He raved as if I'd committed the Seven Deadly Sins, and then some."

"I don't know. Liver, I should think," suggested Ainger.

"Well, I don't see why I should have to suffer for his over-eating himself."

"And what's the matter with young Woodley?" Vining wanted to know. "That kid's been going about looking like a whore at a christening these last two days."

Ainger made no answer, but busied himself with pouring out a second cup of tea.

"There is a bit of an atmosphere about the place," Milner said thoughtfully. "What's Simmy's idea in lurking about the corridors like that, in rubber-soled shoes? What's he after? Is it still his purity stunt? What did he want

with you at the Match on Saturday? I saw him come and talk to you while you were putting on your pads, and I thought he looked rather fed. Did you say anything to annoy him?" he added mockingly.

"I couldn't make that out," Ainger answered, and proceeded to relate what had happened.

"What did it mean?" Milner asked.

"G.O.K. I don't."

"And had young Woodley gone to tea with Languorous Laura?" Vining demanded.

"Yes."

"And Simmy was at the Match? Lucky devil! Perhaps Simmy was jealous. Did he know you'd been asked?"

"I don't know. I met Mrs. Simmy in the Lane on Friday and she asked us then. I expect she told him."

"Perhaps she didn't! Perhaps she wanted a *tête-à-tête*. Naughty, naughty! I thought she had a crush on you, Ainger. Still, half a loaf's better than none, and when women get to that age they like 'em dewy and cherubimmy like young Woodley."

"I always told you he was a dark horse," Milner laughed.

"Where is he, by the way?" Vining looked round. "Has he been in to tea?"

"No, he's not," said Milner. "He's keeping out of the way, for some reason."

"Aha!" exclaimed Vining. "The thick plottens. We'll have some fun out of this."

"You're not to rag him, Vining," Ainger said sharply. "The kid's upset about something."

"Oh, rot! He probably tried to hold her hand and she wouldn't let him. I'm going to have him on about it."

They had finished tea, however, before Woodley appeared, and the subject was forgotten. Vining and Milner went up to their study and Ainger remained at the table, engrossed in Edgar Wallace. Presently Woodley came in.

He stopped on seeing Ainger, as though unwilling to join him, and then came to the table surlily and sat down.

"Hullo!" said Ainger brightly.

Woodley did not answer. He poured milk into his cup, looked round for the tea-pot, and pulled it from behind *The Flying Squad,* which it was supporting.

"Here, look out!" Ainger protested. "Mind my book! It's gone in the jam, now."

"Sorry," said Woodley briefly.

"Well, you might ask, another time." He wiped off the jam on the tablecloth, nothing else being handy. "What made you so late, anyway? What have you been doing?"

"I thought you might have finished tea by now," Woodley answered shortly.

Ainger raised his eyebrows.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing!" Woodley searched for a book, found one and propped it up before him.

"What's up, eh?"

"Nothing. Your monkey is, apparently."

"Oh, don't be funny!"

"I wasn't being funny. I was speaking the truth."

"You wanted to avoid having tea with me? Was that it?" Ainger persisted. "Why?"

"Oh, shut up! I'm trying to read."

For answer, Ainger seized his book and pitched it into a corner.

"Now, then," he said. "What is it?"

Woodley rose angrily.

"If you won't let me have my tea in peace, I must go," he said, and went to the door, but Ainger got in his way.

"Sit down, and don't be a damned fool!" he rapped out.

Woodley struggled with the door-handle.

"Will you let me go?" he asked.

"No, I won't. I want to have this out."

"Well, you can want, then."

For a moment they stared at each other defiantly, and then Ainger, seeing the enmity and misery in Woodley's eyes, relaxed and came away from the door. Woodley opened it and went out, leaving him helpless and perplexed.

Presently Ainger went up to the study, where he found Woodley pretending to work. He stood a moment, uncertainly, in the doorway and then slouched into the room.

"I say, I'm sorry if I was shirty just now," he began apologetically.

Woodley did not look up.

"So you ought to be," he muttered.

"Well, won't you tell me what's the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter . . . with me. You seem to be suffering from hallucinations."

"What is it?" Ainger persisted. "Has Simmy been worrying you?"

Woodley raised a startled face.

"Simmy? Why, has he said anything?"

"What about?"

Woodley relapsed, in relief.

"Oh, nothing," he said.

"There's something going on, I know," Ainger went on. "Can't you tell me? It'll do you good to get it off your chest."

Woodley threw down his book.

"Oh, go and relieve someone else's chest for a bit, and leave me alone, damn you!" he said angrily.

Ainger looked at him for a moment, and then his tone changed.

"Oh, very well," he said. "If you're going to take it like that, I've got something to say to you."

"Oh, what?" There was an utter lack of interest in Woodley's voice.

"Only that if you're going to walk out with shop-girls, I

shouldn't do it *coram populo,* if I were you. It's dangerous and it's silly."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been waiting to see if you had anything to say before I mentioned it."

"What? What are you driving at?"

"Only that I happened to see you and the girl from Crawley's on the Mallow Road yesterday afternoon."

There was a long silence, and then Woodley said defiantly:

"Well, why shouldn't you?"

"Oh, no reason at all," Ainger said airily. "Only you were going on against it hot enough yourself the other day."

Woodley laughed.

"I was a young fool the other day."

"And since when have you learned wisdom? Since Saturday afternoon?"

Woodley flared up.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked shrilly.

"Oh, nothing . . . !" Ainger looked at the ceiling.

"Yes, you did. Who's been telling you?"

"Telling me what?" Ainger came back swiftly on the question, and then turned his voice to pleading again. "Look here, kid, for the thousandth time, what's the trouble? What in God's name possessed you to go and do a damn fool thing like that? I didn't say anything, but I could see something was wrong when you got back on Saturday. I was hoping you'd tell me. You always have told me things. You know I wouldn't go back on you."

Woodley sat down suddenly, his head averted, struggling with his emotion. Ainger moved to him, laying his hand on his shoulder, speaking urgently, pressing his advantage.

"I'll do anything I can to help you. Honest I will. You know that. Tell me, there's a good fellow."

Woodley crumpled.

"O God, I've been a fool!" he said. "What a hell's game life is! You were right. I was with Crawley's girl yesterday afternoon. I went because I didn't care what happened, or who saw me. I met her outside the town and she asked me to go for a walk in the woods."

"And what happened?"

"Can't you guess?" he asked roughly, and then shuddered at the memory. "O God, I wish I hadn't! It was awful . . . awful!"

Ainger sat aghast.

"But what made you—you, of all people?"

"I tell you I didn't care. I didn't care about anything," he reiterated.

"But why? What had happened to change you like that?"

He shook his head, passionately.

"I can't tell you," he said. "I can't. Don't ask me."

"Has it anything to do with Mrs. Simmy?" Ainger ventured.

"Don't!"

"What was it?" Ainger's voice was begging and very gentle.

After a moment Woodley lifted his head, looking straight into Ainger's eyes, laying his hand on his forearm.

"Swear," he said, his voice trembling with intensity, "swear you'll never tell . . . on your oath . . . ?"

"I swear."

"Well, then . . ." The words stuck in his throat, and he broke off. "No, I can't. It's no good. I can't. Don't ask. I can't tell."

Ainger sat silent, embarrassed by this sudden display of emotion. He had never before seen anything like it, and it made him very uncomfortable. After a while Woodley went on.

"You won't tell about yesterday . . . Vining or any of the others?"

"Of course not."

"It won't happen again . . . ever. I can promise you that. It was horrible . . . beastly! I feel dirty all over. But it just seemed as though nothing mattered."

"Don't let it worry you," Ainger said kindly, awkwardly. "I wish I could help you."

Woodley laughed shortly.

"Thanks, but you can't," he said. "Oh, I shall get over it in time, I suppose." There was a pause, and then he turned, looking up at Ainger with an almost childlike pleading. "Ainger," he asked, "do you hate me for yesterday . . . like I hated Vining?"

"Of course not," Ainger assured him.

"I hate myself," he said simply, and fell to brooding again. Ainger looked at him helplessly. There was nothing he could say. He patted him clumsily on the shoulder, loafed round the room, and went out.

XVI

THE next day was an O.T.C. Field-day. Woodley hated the O.T.C.; he hated his ill-fitting khaki uniform, and the rough feel of its collar round his neck; he hated polishing his buttons and shoulder-badges with "Soldiers' Friend," and keeping the polish from getting on the material; he could never roll his puttees with sufficient accuracy nor fold his greatcoat into the neat concise pack that it was expected to assume; he hated the eternal platoon and company drills in the gravel playground, and the weary route-marches and senseless manœuvres over the neighbouring country. In the winter there were indoor parades after school in the classrooms, learning Semaphore and Map Reading and Infantry Training. He regarded the whole thing as a boring, mechanical waste of time, an interminable fatigue. Urged, on account of his prefectship, to attempt some measure of promotion, he had managed to become Lance-Corporal and remained there, prevented by his lack of interest from rising any higher.

To-day he went on parade with a racking headache. Again he had scarcely slept the previous night. Disgust had lessened, but fear had grown in him; he had lain thinking of every possibility of discovery; the chance of his cap being found, and the prospect of having to go in to Crawley's and face the girl behind the counter were seized on by his imagination and distorted out of all proportion. He pushed them from him, seeking sleep, and a new thought leaped into his mind, leaving him cold with terror. Supposing she were to have a baby? What would his position be if she named him as the father? Would he have to marry her? Could she bring a lawsuit? There were things

called Bastardy Actions, weren't there? What should he do? What would his father say? What would happen? He found himself face to face with a blank wall of fear. Discovery, fatherhood, disease: the three possibilities stalked before him like giant phantoms. He grew feverish with panic. All day the thoughts would not leave him. They hammered in his brain as he stepped out on the march, beating through the Platoon Serjeant's "Left, left. Left, right, left." They followed him, nagging and insisting, through the day's manœuvres which led him, by a curious irony of circumstance, into Mallow Woods, where he found himself looking for his cap, trying to recognise the spot where she had taken him. Through all the extended order movements, the rushes across open fields, throwing himself down on the ground, leaping up again and racing, with his pulse thudding in his throat and his legs aching under him, his shoulders chafed by the straps of his accoutrements, they followed him, plaguing him, pestering him, terrifying him, clutching at his heart with renewed horror if for one moment he forgot them. On the long, weary march home, marching at ease while the others with maddening doggedness beat out "One man went to mow," they pursued him. His head was buzzing; he could scarcely see; only his feet moved mechanically, propelling him, while his brain followed a red-hot treadmill of thought.

Thirty men went to mow, went to mow a meadow.
Thirty men, Twenty-nine men, Twenty-eight men . . .

Would they never stop?

. . . One man *and* a dog
Went to mow a meadow!

They grew tired of it at last, and the tune changed. Now it was "Old King Cole."

There's none so fair as can compare
With a Mallowhurst O.T.C.!

They had reached the town. Please God, let us go home the back way! Don't let us go up the High Street! Don't let us have to pass Crawley's! They were called to attention; the band struck up again. They were going up the High Street. They were passing Crawley's. He wouldn't look. He wouldn't. The shop-girls were coming out to watch them pass. Why? Why must they? They had seen them dozens of times. There she was. He wouldn't look at her. He was staring straight at her. Had she seen him? Was it his imagination, or did she really nudge the other girl? They were past now. He wouldn't look back. He looked back. "Woodley, keep your eyes in front of you!" Had she told the other girl? Did everybody know about it? O God, supposing she has a baby . . . !

They were back in the playground at last. Dismiss sounded. He stumbled into the Armoury, pushing his way blindly among the others, thrust his rifle and bayonet into the rack, fought his way into the passage and stood there, dazed, while the crowd cleared about him. He felt himself swaying. Was he going to faint? He went to his locker, pulled off his belt and kit and threw them in. Where was he going? Tea. Oh, yes, tea in the Prefects' Room. He went down the corridor and ran into Cope, a diminutive, perspiring figure in uniform, the tape of his left puttee straggling, a gap in the rolling showing a patch of flannel underpants. Cope: there was something he wanted to say to him. What was it? Dimly it pushed through his memory. He called him.

"I say, Cope."

"Yes, Woodley?" Cope stopped.

"I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Woodley."

What did he want? What did he want to say?

"What the hell do you mean by asking Mrs. Simmons about Riley?"

"Mean?" Cope quavered in surprise. "I wanted to know what he'd done."

"Didn't you know?"

"No, Woodley. No one would tell me, and Vining told me to ask her."

"Vining? Told you to ask her?" Woodley echoed.

"Yes, Woodley. Ainger and Milner were there. They'll tell you."

"You little fool!" Woodley burst out, furiously. "He was only pulling your leg. How could you go and ask a woman a thing like that?"

"I didn't know what it was," Cope said.

"Do you know now?"

A gleam of relish came into Cope's eye.

"Yes, Woodley," he said.

"Did—did Mrs. Simmons tell you?"

"No, not properly. She told me to come back, but I didn't like to. Vining told me."

"Vining?" Woodley repeated, and then a thought came to him. "Does he know you asked her?"

"No, I didn't tell him," said Cope, with a kind of unconscious wistfulness. "I didn't think she'd like me to. He asked me yesterday if I'd found out yet." He paused a moment, and then added succulently, "And then he told me."

Woodley made an inarticulate sound of rage.

"That's all, Cope," he said. "Clear out."

So that was the meaning of it. It was Vining who had done it, who had put him up to asking, as a joke. He had dimly suspected it, before; that was what had prompted his "unless," when Laura had asked him if he thought Cope's question had been asked in innocence. It had occurred to him then that someone might have urged Cope to it, for a

rag, or dared him to ask her, but he had dismissed the thought. Now he was aflame with indignation. He forgot somehow his resentment against Laura in his anger at this, that he saw as an insult to her. It was just one more evidence of the beastliness of life. Vining, with his filthy mind and his foul tongue, daring to do a thing like that! And then telling Cope after all, relishing it, he knew, relishing the corrupting of innocence. He could just imagine how he must have told him, flavorously, juicily, with many innuendoes and elaborate euphemisms. It was all of a piece: Vining and all that he stood for, and all that he himself had gone through the last three days. He saw Vining suddenly as a sort of grinning personification of evil, mocking, triumphing, trampling laughingly on all that he had once held beautiful and fine. The world was horrible, filthy, swarming, and it was ruled by Vining and his kind, who defiled it, for their pleasure.

His head was aching. He was too tired to think, too tired to reason. The Prefects' Room was empty. The others presumably had gone to change out of uniform before tea. He sat down at the table, hacked a piece of bread from the loaf and splashed milk and tea into his cup. But he could not eat. He could only sit and stare before him in a blind, seething, self-devouring fever of hate and anger.

Presently Vining and Milner came in, singing cheerily. Milner went over to the gramophone and began to wind it up. Suddenly something broke in Woodley.

"Don't put that thing on," he said sharply. "Vining, I want to talk to you."

"Always at your service, sweet one," Vining answered.

"Did you tell Cope to ask Mrs. Simmons about Riley?" he demanded.

"I believe I did," Vining laughed. "Why? Has he asked her?"

"Why did you?"

"Oh, for a joke! Why, what's the trouble?"

"You think it was a joke, do you? I think it was a cad's trick."

"And who asked your opinion?"

"No one. I give it to you, gratis. I think it was a beastly thing to do."

"Do you, now?" Vining mocked.

"Yes, I do," Woodley swept on. "A filthy, swinish thing. The kid didn't know what he was asking."

Vining laughed.

"Well, he knows now, anyway," he said.

"Yes. Thanks to you and your filthy mind." There was an unaccustomed note in Woodley's voice that arrested Vining.

"Here, what's got your goat, Woodley?" he asked.

Before Woodley could answer, the door opened and Ainger came in. Vining turned to him with a grin.

"I say, Ainger," he said. "Cope's been asking Mrs. Simmy about Riley's offence."

Woodley swung round on Ainger.

"Yes, and you let Vining put him up to it," he shouted.

Ainger stood amazed at the sudden tumult into which he had walked. He could not imagine what was going on. He had never seen Woodley look like this before. What had happened?

"How do you know he asked her?" Milner said suddenly, speaking from behind Vining's back. "Did he tell you?"

"Or did *she?*" Vining put in, sweetly, insinuatingly.

"Never you mind," Woodley threw back.

"I didn't know you were on such intimate terms with the Lady Laura as that, Woodley," Vining smiled. "Have you been playing the young Don Juan at your *tête-à-tête* teas?"

"What do you mean by that?" Woodley raged.

"Oho! Got him on the raw, have we? And did she virtuously repulse you?"

"Shut up, Vining!" Ainger sought to break through this rising tempest, but it overwhelmed him.

"Hard luck, Woodley!" Milner laughed. "Try someone more accessible next time. Crawley's girl, for instance."

It was a shot in the dark, but it went home to Woodley, staggering him. What did it mean? How did Milner know? Had Ainger betrayed him? That, too? Was there no trust, no decency anywhere, any more? Had everyone banded against him, even Ainger? He looked at him quickly. Ainger's face was worried, anxious; he was seeking for some way to stem this tide, baffled by the sudden turn that it had taken, but Woodley misunderstood his look. He took it for guilt, and his last belief left him. He felt as though he were being pushed back against a wall, as though everything were closing in on him. A red mist began to float before his eyes.

"But don't be discouraged," Vining was saying. "Remember, 'If a lady says *no,* she means *perhaps;* and if she says *perhaps,* she means *yes;* for if she says *yes,* then she's no lady!' Try our luscious Laura again. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again. Remember Bruce and the spider."

"Shut up, Vining, or I'll kill you!" He didn't know what he was saying. He could no longer see. Vining's voice was dinning into his ears, turning cart-wheels in his brain. His face, gross, sensual, mocking, seemed to push through the mist before his eyes, growing now larger, now smaller. The room was going round. He caught at the table for support. Somehow his fingers found the bread-knife.

"What did she say, Woodley? 'I would if I could, but I want to be good, and I'm *not* that kind of a girl!' Never mind. It's only done to egg you on to further flights. . . ."

"My God! . . ." He threw himself at Vining.

It was over in a second. Vining had broken away, backing to the fireplace, knocking a vase from the mantelpiece;

Ainger had caught Woodley by the arms, holding him; the door had opened and Simmons was standing on the threshold. The little group was suddenly arrested, and Simmons's voice broke flatly into the silence.

"And what is the meaning of this, may I ask? What is the significance of this bread-knife, and this elaborate tableau?"

"I wanted to kill him," Woodley was gasping, beyond himself. "I wanted to kill him!"

"What does this mean? Was Woodley attacking you, Ainger?"

"No, sir," said Ainger briefly.

"What was it? Tell me. I insist on knowing," Simmons rapped out. "Was it Vining?"

"Yes." Woodley threw the knife from him.

"You were attacking Vining with that knife?"

"Yes," he repeated defiantly.

"Why, may I ask?"

"Oh, does it matter? You've got what you wanted, haven't you; what you've been waiting for?" Woodley cried hysterically. "Here's your opportunity. Now expel me and have done with it."

"How dare you speak to me like that, sir?" said Simmons, sharply.

"Dare? Dare?" Woodley reiterated. A laugh broke in his throat, and suddenly a fit of shivering seized him. He clutched at the table for support; little strangled sounds escaped him.

"Come, pull yourself together, boy! Don't behave like a hysterical schoolgirl."

Woodley continued to shake and whimper in his throat.

"Take me away and have done with it," he sobbed. "You've won. Need you bully me now?"

Simmons seized his arm.

"Help me to get him to the sick-room, Ainger. I shall

want to see you later, all of you. Come, sir. Take his other arm."

Ainger stepped forward feeling suddenly like a prison warder, brutal and inhuman. Woodley was near collapse. He took his arm as kindly as he could, and between them they supported him out.

Vining and Milner stood where they were, aghast, turning to each other with something like fear in their eyes. It was a long time before either of them spoke. Milner was watching Vining for an indication of his attitude before committing himself.

" 'Ster-ewth!" Vining said at last, flopping into the armchair.

"What's it mean?" Milner asked.

"God knows!" Vining was surprised to find himself trembling.

"What . . . what'll happen to him?"

"God knows!" Vining said again.

They sat and stared at each other.

XVII

MR. WOODLEY was in his office next morning when his sister telephoned him that a telegram had come. She read it to him. It was a brief wire from the Head, giving no facts, but merely mentioning serious trouble and requesting him to come at once.

"What can it mean, Arthur?" Miss Woodley asked. "What can Roger have done?"

"How do I know?" he answered.

"What are you going to do?"

"Go down and see." He replaced the receiver.

The first train down to Mallowhurst was a slow one, bringing him in at two o'clock. It carried no luncheon-car and he fed hurriedly on sandwiches and beer which he bought at Leamington. A cab took him from the station to the school, where he asked for the Headmaster, and was shown into his study. Presently the Head came in, portentously grave, followed by Simmons, nervous and fidgeting.

Simmons had seen the Head the night before. After handing Woodley over to the Matron, he had returned with Ainger to the Prefects' Room, where he had asked a few questions; formal questions. Ainger had done a little rapid thinking on the way.

"Now, then," said Simmons, when he had grouped them round the table. "What precisely does all this mean? Supposing you give me your account of the situation, Ainger?"

"Well, sir," Ainger began diffidently, "I don't know that there's very much to tell."

"What exactly led up to the—er—dramatic situation that I interrupted? What brought Woodley to the point of picking up the bread-knife and attacking Vining here?"

"We were ragging him, sir."

"I see." Some instinct warned him not to explore this point.

"I don't think he's been very well lately," Ainger went on. "I don't know why . . . depressed and . . . we couldn't get him to talk. We were teasing him and . . . well, we went further than we meant, perhaps . . . and . . . I think he rather lost control of himself."

"Obviously."

"That's all."

"I . . . I really don't think he's well, sir," Milner put in.

"Quite, Milner."

"The . . . the heat perhaps."

"Thank you." Simmons snubbed him. "Anything further, Ainger?"

"I don't think so, sir. Then you came in. That's all."

"Yes." Simmons stroked his chin, reflectively. There was nothing more that he wanted to ask. "It all seems rather sufficiently neurotic and unpleasant," he said. "A dangerous young man, I feel, to have about the place. I have—er—suspected as much for some time. There's been something about his manner lately . . . a sort of . . . suppressed hysteria and abnormality. . . . I've been watching it. This outburst merely confirms my suspicions."

"I hadn't noticed it, sir," Ainger said.

"I dare say not, Ainger. But then you perhaps are hardly as experienced in these matters as I am. Still, you yourself said you thought he'd not been well."

"I only meant that I thought he'd seemed . . . well, rather depressed . . . these last few days."

"Yes. That in itself is something of an indication. I had noticed it. Not a normal condition, by any means."

"I don't think there was anything abnormal about it," Ainger argued.

"You will allow me to judge of that. Psychology is hardly your department, Ainger."

"You asked me what I thought, sir."

"I asked you for facts, Ainger."

"Yes. But I think you've got a wrong impression, sir."

"A normal boy does not attack another with a knife, Ainger. There is an element of . . . shall we say melodrama . . . in the implement alone which indicates a somewhat curious state of mind. A boy who has so far let his self-control get out of hand is hardly one whom one would care to allow at liberty . . . especially in a position of authority."

"I think you're inclined to exaggerate it, sir," Ainger persisted.

"Indeed! Thank you, Ainger. I will bear your criticism in mind."

"I mean . . ."

"I am not interested in what you mean. I asked you for the facts. You have given them me. That is all that I require."

"But . . . but what does it mean, then?" Ainger asked hotly. "You're not going to expel him?"

"That is hardly the tone I am accustomed to hearing from you, Ainger."

"Oh, but you can't!" Ainger jumped up. "Look here, sir, I'm sorry if it seems impertinent, but it wasn't Woodley's fault. We were to blame for ragging him like that . . ." He stopped, afraid to continue, lest Simmons should ask the subject of the ragging.

"Yes, really, sir!" Vining spoke for the first time. "Of course we'd no idea he'd take it like that. But he was a bit het-up and . . ."

"Precisely, Vining."

"Yes, sir, but expulsion . . ." Vining continued. "I mean, it's not his fault if he did go off the rails for a minute. You couldn't sack him for it."

"That, Vining, is not my province. That decision will lie with the Head. Naturally you would wish to protect one

of your fellow prefects . . . if only to maintain the prestige of your authority . . . but the matter has wider aspects. There is the safety of the House and of the School to be considered.

"Oh, but that's all nonsense!" Ainger broke in.

"I beg your pardon?" Simmons raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, but I mean, sir, there's no question of safety."

"I don't think we need prolong this discussion." Simmons rose. "In any case, the matter is out of my hands. It is my duty to report it to the Head. He must decide. Meanwhile, you will please keep it to yourselves. I trust you not to talk."

He left them to a raging, impotent wrangle among themselves, and went to his study to think.

He had passed two very unpleasant days, imagining all the time that the story had got about, and that the boys were laughing at him. He had been unable to sit still, driven to wandering about the corridors, making excuses to enter studies unexpectedly, pausing unnecessarily long outside their doors, listening to confirm his suspicions. The thought of Woodley and the sight of him moving about the School chafed his nerves and his temper. He resented him with an almost insane hatred, finding himself thinking out revenges, ways of hurting the boy that came near frightening him with their extremity. When he saw him looking gloomy and miserable, his face set in a sullen dejection, he wanted to seize him, lay hands on him, imagined himself twisting his wrists, hitting him in the face, kicking him, and shuddered at his imagination. He had begun almost to be afraid for his own sanity, wondering fearfully how long he would be able to control himself, whether he might not suddenly break out and do the boy some violence. He recoiled in terror from his thoughts, which yet tormented him.

Now, however, Fate at last had played into his hands. He wanted to give thanks for his liberation as he sat consider-

ing the matter, building up the case, unconsciously transferring his own disordered mental condition to Woodley, going carefully over the whole story, rehearsing the way in which he would present it to the Head, striving to keep a note of gloating out of his indictment. He found that he was curiously excited and also somewhat afraid.

His hands were trembling a little and his voice uncertain as he recounted the situation to the Head, pulling his chair as far as possible into the shadow so that the twitching of his lips might not be seen.

The Head received the story impassively.

"What was the subject of this ragging?" he asked at length.

Simmons was taken aback.

"I . . . I don't know," he stammered. "It did not occur to me to ask."

"Surely, Mr. Simmons . . . However, there is no difficulty about that. We will send for Woodley . . . hear his side of the story."

The school Serjeant brought Woodley down from the sick-room. Simmons sat apprehensively, not looking at him, as he stood, dogged and almost defiant, answering the Head's questions.

"Let me hear your side of this story, Woodley," he said gravely. "Give me your account of what happened."

Woodley impassively repeated the facts as a recital. They had been ragging him; he had lost his temper; picked up a knife; that was all.

"What were they ragging you about?" the Head asked.

Alarm came into Woodley's eyes. He looked fearfully across at Simmons. How much did he know? What had the others told him? They couldn't have told him the truth. The Head repeated his question. He must risk a lie, and was suddenly inspired.

"My poems, sir," he said.

"Eh?"

"My poems, sir," he repeated. "They were ragging me about those. I lost my temper."

Simmons let out a breath of relief. He looked at Woodley almost kindly.

"That hardly seems sufficient provocation for this onslaught," the Head remarked.

"No, sir."

"And that was all?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've nothing you wish to add?"

"No, sir. Nothing."

"Very well. That will do for the present. You can take him back, Serjeant."

The remainder of the interview was simple. The Head accepted Simmons's judgment. A boy like that was dangerous; he could not be allowed at large. It was a case for the neurologist, not the school-master. He had better be removed at once. In view of the lateness of the hour, which was now getting on for nine, he decided to delay telegraphing his father until the morning.

All this he repeated to Mr. Woodley now, with the added weight of careful preparation, giving one of his most impressive performances, his customary thunder toned to a grand, low, dignified rumble, imparting an atmosphere of great traditions and of public-school background, venerable and historic. As he spoke it seemed as though centuries of English aristocracy, sports-loving, cricket-playing, with all their code of honour and convention and restraint, were massed in serried ranks behind his majesty, which was the symbol of their greatness.

After beginning a few noises of expostulation, Mr. Woodley was silenced, not so much impressed as buried beneath

the weight of the Head's words. He was not a Public School man; educated at a Grammar School in the Midlands, he had both the respect and the contempt of the average member of the middle classes for all that the Head was now invoking, but he could not argue. It was like trying to argue with the King.

Politely, firmly, speaking for the whole Public School spirit of England, the Head reduced him to a sense of commonness and inferiority, and then, having bullied resistance out of him on that score, proceeded to dismiss the case as one of neurotic abnormality, the sort of thing that gentlemen transferred to the care of doctors and did not discuss, shutting it off from their notice until, cured, it could fall again into line with the accepted code of normal conduct.

It was only when he found himself alone with Simmons in his study that words returned to him, reinforced now with indignation and stupefaction.

"What does all this mean?" he broke out.

"You've heard the Head's opinion, Mr. Woodley, and . . ."

"Frankly, Mr. Simmons, I don't understand it. A boy doesn't attack another with a knife for no reason at all."

"Not a normal boy, I agree," Simmons assented. "That's the whole point." He took down from the mantelpiece a box of cigarettes which he offered Mr. Woodley, who waved them away.

"I've heard that remark before, this afternoon," he insisted. "What are you driving at?"

Simmons shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't consider your son a normal boy by any means, Mr. Woodley."

Mr. Woodley scratched his head.

"I must say this is an extraordinary affair," he said. "Has this abnormality you speak of manifested itself in any

other ways besides this incident?" He leaned forward. "Are you keeping something from me?"

Simmons drew himself up.

"I have told you all that I consider relevant. There have been a large number of things. I am not judging him on this alone, though naturally I regard it as a climax. A boy who has allowed his self-control to get so far out of hand . . ." He began to recite, but Mr. Woodley interrupted him.

"Yes, yes, yes. I've heard all that, and I say I don't understand it. Roger's not a baby. He must be accustomed to teasing by this time." His voice took on an angry sarcasm. "I should be obliged if you would tell me some of the things you don't consider relevant. Perhaps I might."

Simmons shifted uneasily.

"Really, Mr. Woodley, I should have thought this quite sufficient. But your son's behaviour lately has been far from satisfactory in every respect."

"Really, Mr. Simmons," Mr. Woodley caught his tone, "you can hardly consider it unreasonable of me to ask for details. I'm wired for suddenly to come down here. You tell me that my son has been attacking other boys with a knife because they were teasing him, and that I must remove him at once because he's a danger to the school. You keep saying that he's not normal. Do you mean that he's out of his mind?"

"Mr. Woodley, if you choose deliberately to misunderstand me . . ."

"How can I help it?" His voice went back to wonderment. "I've always found Roger a perfectly normal boy. A little shy and diffident perhaps. What about this large number of things you spoke of? What, for instance?"

"Well, for instance, then," Simmons began angrily, goaded, and then hesitated awkwardly. "For instance, his

manner lately to me and the other masters has been extremely lacking in respect."

"I should hardly call that abnormal myself," commented Mr. Woodley dryly. "Anything else?"

The irony in his voice drove Simmons on.

"His behaviour to my wife," he started, and then stopped, wondering how to express himself.

"What about it?"

"It has been . . . most objectionable."

Mr. Woodley stared at him.

"Do you mean he's been ungentlemanly?" he asked at last.

Simmons fidgeted.

"You don't quite understand me, Mr. Woodley."

"You don't make it very easy for me to do so. Look here, man," he broke out suddenly, "is there anything behind all this, or isn't there? If you're concealing anything, please stop doing so. I'm the boy's father, and surely I'm entitled to know what he's done. He's been rude to your wife? Is that it?" he asked brusquely.

"No. It's far more than that." Simmons was very uncomfortable. "I found them here myself the other day. If I hadn't come in when I did I can't say what might have happened," he finished lamely.

Mr. Woodley was thunderstruck.

"Do you mean he was making love to your wife?" he gasped.

"Well, bluntly . . . yes."

"What exactly do you mean by making love?" asked Mr. Woodley, after the pause in which he took it in.

"Well, really, Mr. Woodley . . . It's not exactly a question that I . . ."

Mr. Woodley cut through his evasion.

"Do you mean that he was trying to seduce her?" he asked quietly.

"Well . . . I hardly . . ." Simmons was nonplussed.

"Can't you answer one question simply? Yes or no?" Mr. Woodley rapped out.

"Well . . . yes, then." The answer seemed to be squeezed out.

Mr. Woodley subsided.

"It's beyond me," he said. "As I say, Roger has always seemed to me a perfectly ordinary boy. Rather quiet and reticent . . . too much so, perhaps. And now you tell me he's been attacking people with knives and assaulting your wife. . . ."

Simmons did not like this impression, but did not know how to remove it.

"I've told you, Mr. Woodley, and the Head agrees, that I regard him as a dangerous influence," he said. "Subversive. Thinks he's artistic. Writes poetry. I know that kind of boy. I've not been a schoolmaster for twenty-five years for nothing. Highly dangerous."

"The Head Master said nothing of this affair of your wife," Mr. Woodley interrupted. "You told him, I presume?"

"I . . . I had not done so," Simmons stammered. "It . . . it only occurred the other day, and with this coming on top of it, it seemed . . . well, you can imagine it's scarcely a pleasant matter for me. But he takes the same view of this business as I do, and in the circumstances it seemed hardly necessary."

"Very well, Mr. Simmons," Mr. Woodley broke in, suddenly weary of the monologue, impotent, and beaten. "I'll take the boy away with me. As I say, it's utterly beyond my comprehension, but . . . I'd better see him, and we'll catch the next train. You can send his things on afterwards. You say he's in the sick-room?"

Simmons rose, thankful to get away.

"Yes," he said. "I'll bring him to you. You can see him here."

Mr. Woodley remained in a blank stupefaction, pacing the little room. He did not understand. There was something behind all this, something concealed, but what? Could it be true that Roger, his son, the shy, timid, gentle boy that he knew, had really done all this, had really been moved to violence with a knife, to murderous assault? It didn't seem possible. And yet the Head had told him that the boy admitted it. The boy that he knew—did he know him? Was it possible that all he knew was only a mask, a mask for passions he had never dreamed were there? And now this story of Simmons's; making love to his wife; what could that mean? He had never seen Laura, but he pictured her middle-aged, dull and drab and faded, in unbecoming clothes. What could it mean? Was it possible that Roger had really gone out of his mind, lost control of himself? You read of these things sometimes with boys of that age; did they really happen?

His thoughts were interrupted by a woman's voice, speaking quickly and urgently.

"Mr. Woodley . . ."

He turned.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mr. Woodley, I must speak to you. I don't know what my husband has been telling you . . ."

He stared at her. Was this Mrs. Simmons, this pale, dark, flower-like woman, almost a girl? A pretty girl; no, not pretty, but appealing, haunting, disturbing. He stared at her.

"Eh? Surely . . . are you . . . Mrs. Simmons?"

"Yes. I don't know what he's said," she went on in the same low, breathless tone. "He's capable of saying anything. But I must speak to you now, quickly."

Laura had heard of the trouble only a few hours before. Simmons had not told her of it; he had spent most of the previous evening behind a book, avoiding her eye, had that morning gone out immediately after breakfast and had lunched in the refectory. It was only from Mrs. Ratcliffe, whom she had met, shopping, in the town, that she had learned that something was amiss, that there had been trouble with Woodley, and that his father had been sent for. Mrs. Ratcliffe, though but sparsely informed, was inclined to gloat.

"That sort of thing is so bad for the school, if it ever gets known. I always thought he was a strange-looking boy. And the poetry he's always writing. It all fits in."

What had happened? Laura dared not reveal her ignorance and asked no questions. She returned home, her heart beating in terror. She sent for Ainger in the luncheon-hour. He, at least, would tell her.

Ainger obeyed her summons unwillingly. He had been thinking hard, conjecturing, surmising, piecing together the events of the past three days. The Saturday tea with Laura, when he had not been able to go; Woodley's uneasiness that night; Sunday afternoon and Crawley's girl and Mallow Woods; Woodley's arrested confessions; Vining's ragging; Cope's questions to Laura; how did they all fit in? He could make no consecutive story; there was some clue missing, but he guessed Laura to be behind it all. What had happened at that tea? Had she made love to him, vamped him? Was that it? But, even so, how would that account for all that had ensued? He did not know, but he was sure that she was to blame. Women; it was always the same. They were the cause of all the trouble. He remembered now that Woodley had seen her in town during the holidays and had withheld the fact, letting it out only by accident. What did it all mean? It was with an angry resentment that he presented himself in her drawing-room.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked curtly.

"Yes," she spoke breathlessly. "I'm glad you've come. I want you to tell me about this trouble with Woodley."

"What about it?"

"Everything. I only heard just now. I want to know what it's all about."

"Has Mr. Simmons not told you?" Ainger asked.

"No. He was in a hurry."

"Wouldn't it be better perhaps to wait . . . for him?" he parried.

"There's no time. I must know now. I want you to tell me." She motioned him to a seat, and said firmly: "Now, please."

"Well . . ." Ainger repeated what he had told Simmons.

Laura listened quietly.

"I see," she said, when he had finished. "What were they ragging him about?"

"Please . . . don't ask me that, Mrs. Simmons."

She guessed; but she must know. If this should be her fault. . . .

"I must," she said forcefully. "I'm sorry, but I must. There are reasons why I must know. You're his friend; that's why I sent for you. It must have been something serious to drive him to that. What was it?"

"Really . . . I . . . I can't tell you that," Ainger stammered.

"You must . . . whatever it is. You needn't be afraid. What was it?"

He hesitated a moment, and then faced her squarely.

"Well . . ." he said, at length. "It was about you."

She betrayed no surprise.

"What about me?" she asked calmly.

"Really, Mrs. Simmons . . ." She looked at him inflexibly, and he gave in. "Well . . . about making love to you."

"About . . . ?" She was genuinely taken aback. She had not expected this. "Why, how did they know?"

Ainger concealed a gasp. So that was it! Vining's random shot had hit the mark.

"They didn't know," he said quietly. "It was only ragging."

"Does . . . does Mr. Simmons know this?"

He shook his head.

"Did Woodley say nothing?"

"Nothing. I think he would rather you didn't tell him."

She smiled sadly.

"I shan't tell him. What does this mean, Ainger?" she asked fearfully. "Expulsion?"

"I'm afraid so, yes. Mr. Simmons's idea is that he's dangerous, abnormal. He talked to us afterwards."

"You didn't tell him why it happened?"

"We told him they were ragging him. He didn't ask why."

"No." She reflected a moment and then rose, holding out her hand. "Thank you, Ainger. I'm very grateful to you for having spoken . . . frankly . . . as you have."

Ainger hesitated.

"I don't know whether you'll think it impertinent . . ." he began.

"Well?"

"But there's nothing you could do . . . or say . . . to save him?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing, I'm afraid. You're fond of Woodley, Ainger?"

"Yes. Very," he answered shortly.

"He confides in you?"

"Sometimes. But I know nothing of this."

Their eyes met. There was a challenge in his.

"But you guess . . . a lot?" she asked.

"That's my affair," he said defiantly, and then looked

away from her. She felt suddenly sick with remorse. What had she done? These boys belonged to each other. Ainger standing there, tall and straight and handsome, represented something in which she had no part, an honesty, a simplicity, a power of friendship, fine and aloof, a comradeship of men into which she had broken as a traitor, destroying it. Her hand went to her breast.

"I'm sorry, Ainger," she said. "Have I spoiled your friendship with him?"

"I'm not likely to see him again," he replied curtly. "I'm leaving in July, and going East almost at once."

"I'm sorry . . ." she repeated. There was nothing else to say.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head sadly. "And, Ainger, please believe . . . I can do nothing. It would only make things worse."

Ainger bowed.

"Would you like to see him before he goes?" she asked.

"They won't let me."

"Perhaps I could arrange it, if you'd like to." He hesitated, unwilling to accept a favour from her whom he regarded as his enemy. Then he yielded.

"Thank you," he said stiffly. "I should like to."

"Well, wait in your study, can you? I'll see what I can do."

He left her. She knew that there was nothing she could do, no explanation she could make which would save him. He must go, and it was her fault. She would never cease to reproach herself for it, but she could not save him now. But she must see his father, explain to him, since she knew that Woodley would say no word. She watched the door until she saw Simmons leave.

"I want to explain," she said. "As well as I can. All this has been my fault."

"Ah!" Mr. Woodley eyed her.

"Listen," she went on. "I was attracted by your son. I encouraged him. I made him make love to me. My husband found us . . ."

"Go on." Mr. Woodley was listening.

"I want you to understand that it was my fault . . . all of it. This trouble yesterday was all due to that. They were teasing him . . . about me . . . about making love to me." She paused. "I've treated him very badly, I know. I'm terribly, terribly sorry . . . more than I can say. I'd give anything, anything in the world, to unlive these last four days. But I want you to understand that I am to blame. If there is any way in which I can make reparation for what I've done . . ."

She broke off, helplessly.

"This is rather different from your husband's story," Mr. Woodley said.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I dare say."

"He gave me to understand that my son had assaulted you."

"Ha!" she laughed bitterly. "You needn't believe that. It was I . . . it was iniquitous of me, I know, but I didn't realise what it meant . . . what it must mean to him. I can never forgive myself . . ."

She made a weak gesture.

"Wait a moment." Mr. Woodley stopped her, thoughtfully. "I'm beginning to understand . . . a good deal. Tell me, Mrs. Simmons . . . you probably know my son better than your husband does. Do you consider him abnormal . . . or dangerous?"

She smiled, the smile lighting up tears in her eyes.

"No," she said. "He's shy and . . . rather lonely, I think. But he's a charming boy."

"Yes," Mr. Woodley said, with quiet irony. "So I gather."

"I know." She nodded. "I deserve that you should think hardly of me. I won't attempt to excuse myself. But, please," she turned to him urgently, "don't let it hurt him . . . more than it must. He must go now; I understand that. But don't let it hurt him."

Mr. Woodley looked puzzled.

"I don't quite follow," he said.

"What will you do with him now?" she asked.

"I really hadn't thought," he answered her. "I suppose, in the circumstances, Cambridge is out of the question." He reflected before continuing.

"He wants sympathy and interest badly," Laura said.

"I know," Mr. Woodley assented. "I'm afraid that's partly my fault. We've never been very intimate, he and I. His mother died when he was quite small, and, somehow, we've always been rather shy of each other. Good friends, you know," he added hastily, "but . . ."

"Father and son," she finished for him. "I understand."

"My sister keeps house for me," he went on. "She's always looked after him, but—well, she's unmarried, and it's not the same thing as a mother."

"Couldn't you take him away with you for a bit?" Laura asked. "Travel with him, get to know him?"

Mr. Woodley gave a rueful smile.

"I'm afraid it would be agony for us both," he said humorously. "We should both die of shyness."

"Surely," Laura said, "surely you could conquer that, if you cared for him?"

He looked at her squarely, and then said very quietly:

"As you do, Mrs. Simmons?"

She returned his gaze.

"You're right," she said. "I do love Roger . . . with all my heart." Then she smiled. "But you needn't be afraid," she added.

He smiled, too.

"I'm not afraid," he said, rose, and patted her awkwardly on the shoulder, turning away as he did so. He stood fidgeting with an ornament on the mantelpiece, one foot on the fender, looking into the grate. After a moment he spoke again. "I'll do all I can. He'd better come into the business . . . and . . . I'll play golf with him . . . get to know him . . . as well as is possible for . . ." he smiled back at her ". . . father and son."

She rose, holding out her hand.

"I think he'll repay you," she said.

"I'll do my best," he answered.

They shook hands.

"You'll let me see him?" she asked. "To say good-bye to him?"

"Of course." He patted her arm. "And anything else you like."

Her eyes brimmed with gratitude.

"Thank you," she said. "I shall feel happier about him now; if you don't think that impertinent."

"I don't," he said.

"His friend would like to say good-bye to him, too. I said I'd try and arrange it. Perhaps you'd take him to his study for a moment." She heard voices approaching. "I must go," she said, turned quickly, and went out of the room.

Mr. Woodley stared after her. He had expected nothing like this. Laura had caught him suddenly, off his guard. He felt a new, surprised tenderness, as though he had been reminded of something he had forgotten. He did not know why he had trusted her so implicitly. He had every right to be angry with her, and she had moved him only to sympathy and understanding.

But there was no time to think of that now. He had to face Roger. At the thought of that his heart sank. What could he say to him? Would not the barrier that had always been between them, that barrier of inarticulate shy-

ness and reserve, be even higher now, even more unsurmountable than before? There would be nothing that they could say; their talk would be an exchange of silences. Or was it possible, perhaps, now that the boy was in trouble, real trouble, for them at last to come together, to join hands at last across the gulf? He tried rapidly to prepare what he might say, to rehearse some unaccustomed words of kindness and understanding, and began to picture a sentimental scene from which he found himself shrinking in fear. Supposing Roger should cry? He couldn't face that. Their relations had too long been formal and aloof to bear a sudden incursion of intimacy. But there was no risk of that; he knew that, too. Too often had he tried and been repulsed in his attempts at friendship; Roger's pride, the pride that had kept him distant always until now, would not let him yield to sentimentality, would keep him the more apart now that he must be really suffering. They would be strangers more than ever. There was relief in that, despite the longing that he felt, the longing mixed with fear, to approach the boy and win his confidence.

He dismissed sentiment, turning to practical matters. What was to be done with him? Cambridge would be impossible, with this stain on his record. He could come into the business. The business; he pictured Roger in the office, saw the two of them, travelling to and from the city, morning and evening, silent behind their papers in the train.

Simmons came in.

"He's in the drawing-room," he said. "Will you see him there? I will stay here within call, if you should want me."

Mr. Woodley was surprised by the sudden stab of hatred for Simmons that shot through him, but he controlled himself, nodded briefly, and went out.

XVIII

WOODLEY was standing in the drawing-room. He looked at his father with a sort of frightened defiance as he entered.

"Well, Roger?" said Mr. Woodley kindly.

"Well?"

There was a silence.

"You know what this means, of course."

"Yes," said Woodley briefly. "The sack."

"Pretty serious, eh?" There was a smile in his voice.

"I suppose so."

Another silence.

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Oh, cut me off with a shilling, I should think. Kick me out." He spoke with a false bravado, a sort of flamboyant dejection. "It'll save you trouble in the long run. I've made a mess of things, and . . ."

"Don't try heroics on with me," Mr. Woodley said impatiently. "They won't wash."

Woodley was deflated.

"Well, it's true," he said.

"Look here, Roger," his father began kindly. "Have you anything you want tc tell me? I realise that there must be more in this than Mr. Simmons's story."

Woodley rejected this advance.

"Well, that's enough, isn't it?" he said.

"I should like to hear your side." He laid his hand on the boy's arm, but Woodley moved away.

"I haven't got one," he said.

Mr. Woodley shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what do you propose to do now?" he asked.

"You'd better send me to Borstal, I should think," Woodley said.

"Roger! Be serious! This isn't a joking matter."

Woodley turned away.

"Everything's a joking matter as far as I can make out," he replied.

"Roger!" Mr. Woodley's tone was almost begging. "Won't you tell me what's the matter?"

"God only knows." He paused. "Life. Or me. Or both."

"You don't feel like being more explicit?"

Woodley turned back to him.

"Father!" he said pleadingly. "You've heard Simmons's story. I admit it. Every word of it. Isn't that enough?"

"I should like to understand, Roger."

"I went for them with a knife. That's all. They were ragging me, and I lost my temper, and I'm a danger to the place."

"What were they ragging you about?"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"Surely?" Mr. Woodley queried.

"Oh, my poems . . . nothing. It doesn't matter. Just ragging."

Mr. Woodley took a decision.

"Roger," he said, "I've been talking to Mrs. Simmons."

"Well, she doesn't know," Woodley said quickly, suddenly alarmed.

"Yes, she does," his father replied. "She told me."

Woodley paled.

"How could she?" he asked. "Who told her? Did . . . ? Oh!" He smothered an exclamation. Ainger had betrayed him.

"Roger," Mr. Woodley said gently. "She told me a lot of things."

"Father! Don't!" he said agonisedly. "Please drop it. I'm being sacked. Isn't that enough?"

"I should like to understand your point of view, Roger."

"No." He shook his head. "I've been a fool. That's all there is to it. Don't make me talk about it."

Mr. Woodley gave it up. He was helpless in the face of this frozen opposition. For a moment he found himself wishing that Roger were a child again, that he could smack him.

"Very well," he said resignedly. "I'm afraid Cambridge is out of the question. You understand that?"

"I suppose so." Woodley accepted it.

"Would you care to come into the business at once?"

"Yes. If you like," he said dully. "Anything. It doesn't matter."

"You've no preference of your own?" Woodley shook his head. "Would you care to go away for a holiday first?"

"No! No! I'll come into the business . . . if you'll have me," he added, with a certain pathetic graciousness. "The sooner the better, I should think."

"Very well, Roger." There was nothing he could say. Woodley turned away to the desk. Some papers were lying on it, where Simmons had left them in the process of correction. The top one happened to be Milner's, marked 40%, with "Slovenly and inaccurate" written across the top. Somewhere underneath would be his own. He wondered if it had been corrected yet. If not, it never would be, now. He resisted a temptation to look and see. He began fidgeting with a book on the desk. The silence was growing intolerable. He turned to his father.

"Hadn't we better be going?" He made an attempt at sarcasm. "I don't want to take a long, last farewell, or go and weep in Chapel, or anything like that. It's not exactly how I had planned my departure," his voice trembled a little, "but is there anything to wait for?"

"I don't think so," Mr. Woodley said impotently. "Mrs. Simmons would like to say good-bye to you."

Woodley shrank back.

"No! No!" he said.

"Why not, Roger?"

"No. Let's get away." He spoke almost frenziedly. "I hate scenes."

"You ought to say good-bye to her."

"No. I'm in disgrace."

"Not with her."

"Father, don't!" he begged. "Let's get away. I can't stand this place now."

Mr. Woodley gave in.

"Very well. I'll go and tell Mr. Simmons." He opened the study door and Simmons came out.

"I don't think there's anything to wait for, Mr. Simmons," he said, and then remembered Laura's request. He turned back to his son. "Perhaps you would like to go to your study for a moment? Is there anything you want to fetch?"

Woodley looked at him gratefully.

"Yes, thanks," he said politely. "I should like to."

"I will accompany you," Simmons said.

"I'll do that, thank you, Mr. Simmons," Mr. Woodley intervened.

"I think, Mr. Woodley, if you don't mind . . ." Simmons began.

"Surely, Mr. Simmons?"

"Mr. Woodley, in these circumstances," Simmons explained, "it's hardly usual . . ."

"I don't know that the circumstances are altogether usual, Mr. Simmons." Mr. Woodley looked at him squarely. Simmons capitulated.

"Well, I must say it's somewhat irregular," he hedged, and then turned to Woodley. "If I let you go with your father, you will not attempt to communicate with anybody?"

"No, sir," Woodley said briefly.

"Well, I suppose there can't really be any harm." Simmons was reluctant to let the matter go.

"None, Mr. Simmons," Mr. Woodley said briefly. "Come, Roger. Will you show me the way?"

They went down the corridor in silence, and up the stairs. At the study door Mr. Woodley said:

"I'll leave you, Roger. You'd probably like to be alone. You'll find me in the private hall. You'd better not be too long." He patted the boy on the shoulder and turned away.

Woodley went into the study. Ainger was sitting in the armchair.

Woodley started.

"Ainger!" he said.

"Yes." He turned and rose.

"Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes."

"How did you know . . . what made you think I'd come?"

"Mrs. Simmons told me to wait here."

"Mrs. Simmons?" He flinched. "Ainger, did you tell her what it was all about?"

"Yes." Ainger looked away from him.

"How could you?" Woodley said angrily. "It was a cad's trick."

"She made me," Ainger said apologetically. "I think she rather guessed."

Woodley shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, I don't suppose it matters much, one way or another." He turned to the window.

"I can't tell you, kid," Ainger said tentatively, "how sorry I am about it all. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't tell Simmy."

Woodley turned back. "It doesn't matter," he said.

I'll see to Vining, though," Ainger muttered savagely.

Woodley gave a faint, contemptuous smile.

"Don't take it too hard, old man," Ainger went on, struggling for words, reaching for them into a sort of void of embarrassment. "It's rotten, I know. But you've done nothing to be ashamed of."

"Haven't I?"

They looked at each other helplessly. All their friendship, their affection for each other was seeking for expression, and found none. They avoided each other's eyes.

"Look here!" said Woodley, when the silence had become unbearable. "You'd better clear. Simmy may come up any minute. Good-bye."

He held out his hand, awkwardly. Ainger took it still more awkwardly.

"You might write a line sometime," he said.

"Right you are," said Woodley. "Good-bye."

They shook hands. Ainger stopped, as if to say something more, and then turned and went.

Woodley stood alone, trying to focus his emotions. His feelings were numbed. He could not yet realise that he was leaving, that he would probably not see Ainger again, that their friendship was over, that this was the last time that he would see this room, this friendly little room, with its cheap, familiar, happy furnishings. He tried to stamp them upon his memory as though he were taking an inventory, but he could think of nothing but little things, idle things, silly things, the fact that Ainger's tie had been torn and a white strip of stuffing protruding through the tear, the fact that there was a drawing-pin missing from the calendar on the wall. It had been missing for weeks; he had intended to replace it. He had to think of these things. He realised, suddenly, that if he stopped thinking of them he would cry. He must not think of what he was doing, nor of the sentimental picturings in which of late he had secretly indulged, dramatising what his departure would be, his last Sunday

walk with Ainger, his last binge at the tuckshop. They began to come back to him. He wrenched his mind away from them. What had he come here for? He went over to the cupboard and began to collect some of his belongings.

There was a tap on the door. He started.

"Who's there?" he called.

The door opened quietly. It was Laura. He shrank back towards the window, looking round as if for escape.

"Roger," she said, "I've come to say good-bye to you."

He did not look at her.

"Good-bye," he said tonelessly.

She closed the door behind her.

"Roger," she said, "there are some things I want to say to you. Will you listen?"

"If you want me to."

She looked at him pleadingly and then came and sat down in Ainger's armchair. He kept his eyes on the ground. She turned towards him.

"Roger," she said again, "I want to say how sorry I am for everything."

"That's all right," he replied politely.

"I know why this happened," she went on.

He shivered.

"Please don't," he breathed.

"I must." Her hands went out to him. "Roger, do you hate me terribly?"

He shook his head. She was crying, but he did not see.

"I didn't mean those things I said, when you came back the other afternoon," she told him.

He turned to her bitterly.

"You needn't go back on them now because I'm leaving," he sneered.

"I must. I want you to know the truth. Won't you let me tell you?"

"Is there any need?" he asked.

"Please."

He laid his things on the table, and turned his back to her, staring out of the window.

"All right," he said, and stood waiting.

"Roger, those things," she said. "I had to say them. They weren't true. I want you to think kindly of me, if you can. It was a mistake, a ghastly mistake. I should never have let you tell me what you felt. I should never have shown you that I cared." Her voice trembled. It was terrible talking to his back like this. "But I did care, Roger," she continued. "I still care. Only . . . it can't be. That's all."

She saw him bow his head, ever so slightly, but he did not move.

"Why did you say those things?" he asked unsteadily.

"I had to, Roger, to save you. I know they hurt. They hurt me, too. It tore my heart to say them, but I had to."

"No." He shook his head, bitterly.

She made a last, despairing effort towards him.

"I know you love me, Roger, as I love you. That love is a precious thing . . . too precious to hold. I don't want it to turn to gall inside you. I want you to treasure the memory if you can, as I shall—always."

"Laura." He turned to her now, stood facing her, his eyes wide and tragic.

"We shan't meet again . . . ever, I expect . . ." she began, and then tore herself away from sadness, courageously, bravely fighting tears, struggling to bring a note of happiness into her voice, for his sake. There must be no tragedy in this for him. All that there now was left for her to do was to give him hope, hope for the future, that he might go out into the world without bitterness, with a belief in the beauty that it held, that it might hold for him, that he might leave her without pain, save for the pain of regret, which was inevitable, but would pass.

"Laura, it's not too late . . ." he said.

"Darling boy, it's always been too late. I should be robbing you."

"Robbing me?" he asked in puzzlement.

"Yes. Of your youth. Your future. Your . . ." She sought for a word, and gave it him with a little apologetic gesture, "your birthright." Again she struggled with her voice. "But I want you to remember . . . gladly, if you can."

"Gladly?" he echoed.

"Yes. Gladly!" There was a song in it, triumphant, a cry of pain and joy for the courage of the human heart.

He came across to her and knelt beside her chair. She laid her hand on his.

"You're young," she said. "You've the whole world before you. And I want you to be happy. Don't let me be a bitterness and a reproach to you always. Don't let me spoil love for you. It's the most precious thing in all the world, but it's so often wasted, and it can be so cruel. It can turn so easily to hate and beastliness. Don't let me feel I've done that for you," she begged.

"Never, Laura. Never. I swear it." He had been looking into her face while she spoke, but now he dropped his head upon her hands, kissing them.

She bent and laid her cheek against his hair, touching it with her lips.

"I have loved you, Roger," she said, "with all my heart. I want you to know that, and remember it; that's all." She rose, disengaging herself. "Now, say good-bye to me."

He remained kneeling, looking at her fearfully; then he, too, rose.

"Laura," he said, choking, "you're all the world . . . I can't."

He broke into tears now, and she caught him in her arms, holding him, with his face pressed against her breast, sobbing, while she gently stroked his hair. She wanted to absorb his sorrow, drawing it into herself, that she might

bear it with her own for always, leaving him free, unburdened. Her face was almost radiant; transfigured; exalted. Yet she must give him back his manhood, his pride. This must be his moment, now and for always, to cherish as a standard, to remember; that from now on he might be a man and not a boy in his own heart.

"Roger, dearest boy," she said, "you must be brave. Don't make it harder for me."

With an effort he raised his head and they looked into each other's eyes.

"Good-bye," she said. "And God bless you always."

She kissed his forehead gently and then turned and left him, her eyes so wet with tears that she could scarcely see the way, fumbling for the door-knob with her hand, the other pressed against her lips, that no sound might escape her. The door closed behind her.

XIX

THERE was no train until half-past six. Woodley and his father spent two hours in the musty smokeroom of the "Lion," with its faded leather and horsehair. They sat, not talking, not looking at each other, pretending to read the time-tables and decaying papers that were lying there. Presently Mr. Woodley got up and went out. He put a trunk-call through to his sister in London.

"I'm bringing Roger home, Gertrude," he said. "Never mind what's happened. I'll tell you later on. Only, I don't want you to see him this evening. Let him go straight to his room. Have a fire lighted. Make it look nice. Don't ask any questions. I'll explain later."

They dined on the train in silence. Woodley's face was set and quite expressionless. In silence, too, they drove from Paddington to Hampstead. At the front door Mr. Woodley turned to him.

"You'd probably like to go straight to your room," he said. "Don't bother about anything to-night. I've got my key. We won't ring. You needn't see anyone." He opened the door. Woodley went in, threw his coat and cap on the hall table, and walked upstairs.

Mr. Woodley joined his sister in the library.

At eleven o'clock they went upstairs to bed. Mr. Woodley stopped outside his son's door and knocked gently.

"Come in," said Woodley's voice.

He went in. Woodley was sitting in the armchair before the fire, still fully dressed. There were faint smudges of tears on his face. Mr. Woodley came over to him, laid his hand on his shoulder, smiled down kindly, tentatively, at him.

"All right, Roger?" he asked.

Woodley looked up at him. His face quivered, and then with an effort he achieved an answering smile. He nodded.

"Quite all right," he said.

THE END

THE

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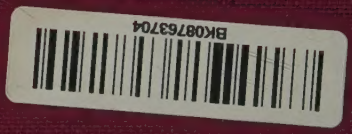
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